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## Palmetto Ave

Rachel M. Wootten  
*Iowa State University*

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Palmetto Ave

Rachel M. Wootten

Major Professor: Debra Marquart

Iowa State University

This novel takes place in present-day Florida. Each chapter represents a different point of view from each family member as well as those people outside of the family. The Hewitt family faces several trying times, including the mental illness of their mother, abuse within the family, coming of age, and learning how to love not only oneself, but also how to love others.

Palmetto Ave

by

Rachel M. Wootten

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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Major: English (Creative Writing)

Major Professor: Debra Marquart

Iowa State University

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Rachel M. Wootten

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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Major Professor

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For the Major Program

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For the Graduate College

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	1
PART ONE	10
PART TWO	17
PART THREE	88
PART FOUR	272

## PROLOGUE

Rani

Old man Diatro knew how to handle a lasso. The wind-up, the toss, the snag. He knew how, even though he had never set foot on a ranch. Instead of cattle, he lassoed children who giggled and whispered on their way home or on their way to the beach. Palmetto Ave was one of the main streets behind the elementary school. The children could avoid the road, but it became just as much of a habit for them as it was for the old man himself. He sat on his porch at the top of the steps and waited for them. The folding chair he sat in was coated with rust from the rain and humidity, and several loose strips of webbing swung beneath his butt.

The instant you hit first grade, with pigtails or a new lunch box, you could be the old man's next catch. But once you hit high school, having grown breasts or maybe even facial hair, he was done with you, as if you never had taunted him by slowing down as you walked by his yard, doing everything but facing him and begging him to catch you. If you were caught, you gained instant fame. Everyone knew he only caught two or three children a week, pretending to choose them at random, but all of them knowing full well a secret plan existed. The younger children never knew Mr. Diatro as a person, as a grandfather, or as the old man at the fruit stand who would ruminate over choosing apples for a good ten minutes; instead, they knew his lasso, and that was enough for all of them.

Rani had never been caught by old man Diatro. She made sure that she crossed the street when she was two houses away. The boss of Rani's group of friends, Alice, and the rest of their friends would stroll by his yard, glancing at him sideways. With his Stetson pulled low, you couldn't see his eyes, so you were only guessing when you got goose-bumps and

swore up and down he was staring at you, promising to get you next time. Rani kept going down the opposite side of the street, her eyes drawn down to her raggedy flip-flops and the sidewalk. A crack in front of Ms. Porter's house, a footprint stuck in the middle of the block in front of the Grillos' house, and a tiny step-up that everyone was guaranteed to trip over at least once in front of the Andersons' place. Rani didn't like the game, didn't like the idea of the lasso whistling through the air and tightening around her waist.

Following her friends out the school doors and across the blacktop, Rani felt the humidity tonguing her face as she rounded the fence and slowed down to a trot under the trees.

"We've gotta pass his house today." Alice talked over her chewing gum which she popped into her mouth the second they left school grounds. "I dare you guys. You won't do it, but I dare ya anyway."

"No way," Several of the girls murmured in unison.

"Chickens," Alice scoffed.

"It's too hot, Alice. Can't we go swimming instead?" A lone voice echoed from the group.

"Shut up, Denise." Alice whipped her red ponytail around and jutted her hip to the side. "We're passing his house."

Alice was bossy. Rani knew this. But she didn't want to say anything to break the spell within her. She could do it today--taunt him into trying his lasso on her. It had to be the anger inside which consumed her fear, either that or the empty pit of her stomach goading her. Today, in secret, Rani shuddered with anticipation as she imagined herself standing tall in

front of Mr. Diatro's yard. His old lasso wouldn't catch her. And if it did, she'd start off running faster than he could think to hold tight, and he'd come flying off the porch, flailing after her down the street.

"You coming with me, Rani?" Alice nudged her friend in the ribs.

"I dunno." The bravery within faltered, just like her hunger did last week when she went to take a huge bite of pasta only to find a cockroach staring back at her from the mound on her spoon. But even then, she just dumped the contents on the table--macaroni, cockroach and peas--and heaped up her spoon once more because her stomach insisted.

"You aren't chickening out too, are you?"

"I didn't say that." Rani's shoulders tightened in defiance. "I just don't know if it's a good idea.

The group neared Palmetto Avenue. Each girl slowed down, but none stopped, not even Alice.

"I'm going swimming. It's too hot." Alice wiped her pale and freckled forehead, even though a dot of sweat hadn't even appeared there. "Anyone want to come?"

Rani declined and bit back a smile because Alice balked like a chicken. Instead of following her friends, Rani stood and watched the girls giggling and bobbing as they went down the sidewalk. Alone, she dragged her hand along the fences as she walked home. She hoped no one would be in the house, so she could pull off her shoes and sit in front of the pulsing fan without being bothered. If luck had its way, maybe there were a few cookies left from last Sunday when a few of the church ladies brought plates full of food for her and her family. Maybe.



Rani hesitated in front of the house, staring. The paint had been peeling since she could remember, and garbage bags now covered the whole left side of the porch, not just beside the door where she or her sister continually left them. She leaned on the gate, tucking the wood under her armpits. Her eyes stared.

"Mariella Rain!" Rani's older sister screamed as the front door slapped open. "Get your ass in here!"

Rani didn't even jump from her slumped over position. Instead, her eyes refocused on her sister's figure standing on the porch.

"Dammit, don't make me tell you again." Rosaline spoke her words matter-of-factly.

"Coming," Rani kicked open the gate and trudged up the cracked pathway and onto the porch.

"Momma said we had to clean the house before she gets home."

Rani snorted, "Clean what?"

Dishes loaded upon dishes on the counter and on the table. Gnats flew around the bowls crusted with cereal and sour milk, cups half filled with rancid juice, and dishes caked with spaghetti sauce and pasta. The smell was faint but cloying. Rani wanted to get out of the kitchen, wanted to smell the fresh salt air outside.

"Don't make me hit you," Rosaline said.

Rani eyed her sister. Rosaline was seventeen, five years older than Rani. Rosaline liked to hurt people. She'd pinch Rani on the inside of her arms where the skin thinned or straddle her and tickle her ribs with her elbows or fingernails until purple welts formed and

Rani's underpants were soaked through. Sometimes she'd just plain scare Rani with a look that glittered evil.

"What do I need to do?" Rani picked up a stack of newspapers from a kitchen chair and dropped them on the floor.

"A lot, but sitting on your butt ain't one."

Tugging at her ear, Rani eyed the cookie plate which sat on top of a stack of dirty dishes. A handful of cookies still rested on the plate. She tried counting them from her position, wondering if there were enough for all of them.

"Momma wants us to clean. Let's go," Rosaline said.

Rani's eyes followed Rosaline's hands as she grabbed a cookie. Pudgy fingers, soft and pale fingers. Hands that teased hair, applied thick makeup and pinched and grabbed at Rani's vulnerable spots. Rani didn't care about cleaning the house. She tried. Really, she did. But she was hungry. Rosaline had a chocolate chip and a peanut butter for sure. When Rani looked back at the plate only three cookies remained. Her stomach gurgled.

"Hungry, Mariella?" Rosaline laughed at her.

Rani's mouth watered. If she tried to reach for a cookie, any cookie, Rosaline would smack her for sure. Why chance it for a cookie? *I'm hungry*. It was Thursday. The dinner plates the church ladies brought were empty. They wouldn't be coming back with more food until Sunday. *Where'd Momma go?* Was Thomas sleeping upstairs? Or was he with her? If he was with her maybe she felt okay. Maybe she would bring home groceries and help Rani with her reading homework. Rani's stomach growled and lurched. She stared back at the plate on the table. All that was left of the church ladies' food was the desserts—cookies and

brownies and cake, white cake with chocolate frosting. But it was the cookies Rani wanted. The peanut butter ones. Rani could smell the peanut butter, already taste it before the cookie even pressed against her lips. Just one cookie. Her stomach gurgled again. Rani grabbed a cookie and dodged out of the chair and around the table.

"You stupid bitch," Rosaline talked over a mouthful of cookie. She grabbed another one and sauntered toward Rani.

"I'm hungry," Rani moved around the table. She knew this cat and mouse game.

Rani bit into the cookie. A tiny bite. She chewed the cookie, letting the taste sit in her mouth—wanting to eat it in slow-motion, but popping the rest of it into her mouth and swallowing in silent gulps. Rani went to reach for the last cookie. Molasses. She knew it was still soft. Gigi's cookies always stayed softer than the other ladies. How'd she do it? Molasses. The gentle fold of the cookie in Rani's hands. The ginger. The sugar sprinkled on top.

Rosaline's eyes followed Rani's. "You can't eat that cookie." She went to grab for it.

"It's mine," Rani grabbed the cookie and pushed back from the table, knocking a chair over.

"Give it to me!"

"No," Rani clutched the molasses cookie in her hand, being careful not to break it.

Rosaline leapt around the table and grabbed Rani's wrist with a solid yank. *How did she move so fast? Why didn't I react, let go, move? Why?* Fear slid into the room. Slid inside my legs, my heart. Numbing me. Numbing me.

"Let go of it," Rosaline screamed.

"No," Rani tried to shimmy out of her sister's grip, just like she did when Rosaline would use socks or pantyhose to tie her up. When that failed, Rani tried prying off her sister's fingers, starting with the pinkie like Justus showed her.

"Don't make me hurt you."

"Rosaline , stop it."

Rani's hand felt numb from Rosaline's grip around it, but she wouldn't let go of the cookie. Rosaline walloped her on the back. Rani's eyes stung.

"Let go!" The older girl screamed.

Rani lurched for the door, but Rosaline swung her back into the kitchen. Dull slaps echoed in Rani's ears, but she still clung on to that small bit of flour and sugar all rolled into one. Still holding Rani's hand, Rosaline pinned her against the counter and began throwing dishes out of the sink with her unoccupied hand. Glass shattered behind them until the sink leered in its emptiness. Rosaline turned on the water faucet.

"Stop it," Rani pleaded.

The knowledge flickered somewhere within Rani that she could fight back. Even though Rosaline would whisper threats into her ears while she tried to go to sleep, Rani always thought she'd get away before her sister could do anything to her. *But what if I'm too weak and it won't work? Rosaline will kill me for sure.* Rani watched her own hand being lowered into the garbage disposal. She began to forget the moments when Rosaline sang to her and twirled the Star of David for her and Thomas.

"Roz—" she said, staring into the garbage disposal.

"Bitch," Rosaline breathed.

Rosaline flipped on the switch next to the sink and the garbage disposal whirled into action. The droning filled the kitchen and Rani could feel the vibration in the counter. Rani's mouth watered with fear and her belly convulsed. Rani screamed and the cookie plunged down the drain. She listened to it being chopped and swallowed.

"You know what's next, don't ya?" Rosaline laughed.

"Let go, Rosaline," Rani panicked. Her knees banged against the cabinets, her hip bones grated into the edge of the counter. "Please. I'm sorry. Don't, Rosaline."

"Fuck you," Rosaline pulled her sister's wrist down toward the whirling drain.

Rani couldn't help it. Her fear and rage fought within her belly, each one clawing its way to the top of her lungs. She grasped for her sister's long brown hair which hung around their faces and pulled hard. Rosaline's grip loosened. That was all she needed. Rani bolted.

Her long, bony legs fumbled as the woods came into view. The palmettos sprouted like a bouquet of green swords marking the entrance to Rani's kingdom. She slid between the opening in the brush, not even disturbing a frond as she disappeared into the canopy of leaves. The rhythm of her heart beat deeper within her skin, not from running, but from the distance she created between herself and her house. Rani ducked beneath the web of a banana spider and kept going. The sand and leaves swished under her feet as she climbed up a little hill and plopped down. Carpenter ants skidded out of her way and mosquitoes hummed. Rani flexed her arm, catching a mosquito who tried to withdraw its stinger. Watching its body fill with her blood, Rani finally swatted it, smearing her own blood with the insect's. She sat there in the woods, sucking her blood-stained fingers, tasting metal.

As the darkness began to creep into the woods, Rani stretched her legs and stood, shaking the sand off her backside. She scratched a scab underneath her chin and broke into a trot down the small hill and out onto the sidewalk. Glancing to her right, Rani imagined Rosaline waiting with tense hands and a glaring eye; glancing to her left, she saw old man Diatro's house. Rani turned left.

Her legs slowed to a walk, her breathing heavy, as she approached his house. The urge to cross the street rose within her stomach, but Rani pushed the feeling down to at least her knees. It was different on this side of the street. The sidewalk rose and fell in a different pattern, and the grass gleamed a little greener, appeared a little softer. Rani smelled sulfur water, knowing someone cared enough about his lawn to water it; she smelled a barbecue coming from a backyard, knowing families ate real meals; and she smelled the ocean hitching a ride on the wind, knowing she could rely on the familiar scent to soothe her.

Feet coming to a halt, Rani lifted her head with a snort. The deserted porch sat before her. A folding chair leaned against the porch railing. The house stood quiet and dark.

"Lasso me," Rani whispered. "Lasso me."

## PART ONE

Dori, Rani and Rosaline's momma, lugged the baby around the kitchen like a stuffed teddy bear. Thomas' legs swung wildly and his arms attempted to reach things each time she bent down to get something or turned to make sure the girls were okay.

"How's your drawing coming, babe?" Dori asked Rani.

"Almost finished." Rani glanced at Rosaline as she answered and then averted her eyes. She didn't want to make Rosaline mad. She hoped momma would ask her a question too so Rosaline wouldn't hurt her for being the favorite.

"George's daddy is coming for dinner. Fried chicken and peanut butter pie. Rosaline, you better be back in time. Six. No later. Now I mean it." Dori's words traveled over musical scales as she moved toward the girls and away from them.

Dori sighed. If she tried to set Thomas down, he'd start bawling. Rani was sprawled across part of the kitchen floor coloring pictures and Rosaline was bent over her math book trying to finish her homework so she could go to Sarah's house. As Dori padded around the kitchen, she could feel sand and dirt coating the bottom of her feet. The floor needed to be washed but right now she needed to focus on the pie. If it didn't get in the refrigerator soon, it would never be ready. She turned on the mixer, still juggling Thomas in one aching arm, and the batter flew out of the bowl and onto the counter, across her tank top and over Thomas' face. He kicked his legs and giggled.

"Dammit," Dori turned the mixer off and glanced around the kitchen. Pans and bowls leered at her. Beaten eggs, flour, chicken, seasonings, an open jar of peanut butter, egg shells, cooking spray, and coated spoons crowded the table and the counters. Dori blinked hard as

the objects loomed in and out of focus. Not now, she thought. Where're my meds? Are there any in the house? Did I dump them? My God, I dumped them. "Rani take Thomas."

Rani didn't glance up, a piece of chalk suspended over a page. "But Momma, Mrs. Parks said--"

"Oh, come on. You're just coloring with some chalk."

"They're pastels, Momma. And I need—"

"You need to take him."

Rani glanced up at Dori's cracking voice. Her mother's eyes glittered with blankness. The girl practically jumped from the floor and grabbed her brother. Thomas pulled at her hair. Rani went to back out of the kitchen toward the back door where Rosaline stood.

"Don't go out there," Dori said. "They'll see you. I told you to stay away from the windows. Duck down. Now. They'll take Thomas if they see him."

Rani knew not to question her mother. She had tried twice before. Both times Dori screamed at her in high pitches, begging her to listen to the voices, to listen, listen. The spit gathered in the corners of her mother's mouth as Dori screamed and shouted and argued with the voices. Rani would sit in the corner of the kitchen and rock Thomas who would be screaming himself at this point. He couldn't understand why Rani held him too tight or why his mother's voice terrified him at this pitch.

Now, as Dori began shouting to the voices, Rosaline began to stroke Rani's hair.

"What do you mean it isn't good enough?" Dori talked to the air around her. "I can't. My children. Not now. Don't hurt them. Wait—I'll do anything. Please. Not them. Tell me. What do you need?"



The children huddled against the wall as they watched their mother. With one hand Rosaline patted Thomas' back and with the other, she tugged in gentle motions through the black thickness of Rani's hair. Dori's voice began in hoarse whispers and her movements became robotic. And then like a symphony strengthening into a crescendo, Dori's voice rose into harsh screams that made the hair on Rani's neck rise and made her shoulders shake with chills. Rani watched her mother tug at her head, pulling out chunks of blond curly hair. Every time Dori threw a clump of hair onto the floor, Rani cringed. She knew it hurt to have your hair pulled out. When Rosaline got angry, that was the first thing she'd reach for on Rani. The hair and then the skin on the underside of her upper arms.

"Just look at me, silly. Don't watch her," Rosaline whispered.

Rani nodded, her eyes wide and her heart racing. Her legs were sticking to the linoleum and the heat from Thomas was making her stomach sweat. Instead of patting Thomas, Rosaline reached for the necklace around her neck. It was a gold Star of David. The Hewitts weren't Jewish. Rosaline had gotten hold of the necklace from one of her boyfriends. Or maybe he was just a friend who wanted to be a boyfriend. She couldn't remember. As she twirled the star in front of Rani and Thomas, her brother turned to watch the gold piece. For a moment, he stopped screaming and instead hiccuped in breaths, one hand reaching out for the shiny object.

Around the kitchen, Dori threw spoons and continued to shout. "You can't have me. You can't have them either. NO, NO, NO! Go away. Just go away. I put the water in the cabinets. Six jugs. You said five but one extra. Yes. Stop bothering me. I did it. The foods even there. Can opener. Oh my God. I forgot a can opener." Drawers flew open and things

began to drop to the linoleum, scattering around the three children sitting in the corner. A spatula. A potato masher. A grater.

Dori sometimes believed the world was going to end. Either an earthquake would hit or a meteor was aimed directly at the house. Other times, she thought people were spying on them and that if the children were seen, they would be taken. And other times, she loved the voices. She laughed and crooned to them, sometimes even sang as she danced around the kitchen. When she stayed on the meds, the voices didn't come. But instead, she stayed sad and quiet. She got too weak to hold Thomas and instead she sat in a chair and watched her children playing. Sometimes if Rosaline was there and wasn't flying around angry in her own world, she put on a show for Rani and Thomas, acting out the part of snooty woman, a teacher, a football player. Rani would laugh and Thomas would laugh because his sister did. For Dori, the feeling to laugh surfaced, but she couldn't get past the thickness of her medication. Instead, she watched her teenage daughters and her infant son—helpless, uninvolved.

She couldn't find a balance in herself. The worst moments were when Rosaline cursed and screamed. At Dori, at Rani. She never touched Dori, just stood in front of her and screamed. The words didn't upset Dori; half the time she couldn't remember what Rosaline said. What hurt was watching Rani. The girl wouldn't cry, but her face slid into a hard, blank expression. She threw her arms over her head or tucked her head down if she was holding Thomas. And Rosaline would hit her with fists and open palms, both creating harsh sounds in the quiet kitchen. When Rosaline left, Rani sat on the floor, swaying in moments like the tall

palm trees in the yard. Dori wanted to hold her, to tell her she was so sorry, but between the meds and the voices, she couldn't move.

George, Dori's husband who worked at his father's newspaper, came home to find Rosaline, Rani and Thomas on the back porch. Rosaline held Thomas in her arms and Rani's head was in her lap. The stench from Thomas' diaper mixed with the evening air of barbecues and sulfur water from people watering their lawns.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Momma," Rosaline began. Her arms were jittery, her eyes tired but large, searching. "We sneaked out and couldn't get back in. She locked the doors."

As he set his briefcase next to the door, George peeked through the glass. He could see Dori rocking beside the stove. Surrounding her seemed to be half the contents of the cabinets in the kitchen. With shaking hands, he fought to unlock the door.

Once inside, George knelt next to her. "Dori, baby. Dori?"

She was crying and rocking and wouldn't look at him.

"Dori?" he reached for her.

"Don't touch me."

George felt his gut tighten. He knelt in eggs and flour and peanut butter. For a moment, he thought about his father who would be arriving in an hour. He shouldn't have asked her to cook. It was too much. He should've known. Should've known. Dammit. Think. George glanced around the kitchen.

"Looks like you had some fun in here, huh?" he picked up a few spoons and dumped them in the sink. "Why don't we go out to eat? The kids love that place on the water, with the milkshakes. I'll run a bath for you."

He knelt in front of her again. "The girls and I will clean this up." Dori stared at him, her eyes red-rimmed and swollen. Peanut butter smeared across her left cheek. George reached out to wipe it off and paused, "Okay, baby?"

"I love you," she said.

George pulled her to him. "I love you too, baby." He lifted her into his arms and carried her upstairs. She felt hollow and cold against his chest, in his arms. "It'll be okay, babe. We'll go to the doctor's tomorrow. See if he can try to rework the medication again. Okay?" As he set her on the edge of the tub, George turned on the water, finding a warm balance between the hot and cold.

"I ruined dinner, Georgey."

"Hey, I wasn't in the mood for chicken anyway."

Dori laughed and touched his neck.

"You love me?" she asked.

"Always," he said.

The tub began to get full and George added her tangerine oil and bubbles. Next, he helped Dori out of her dirty clothes, a tank top and flowing skirt with bells that trickled out a soft melody.

"You got me that skirt," she said. "In St. Augustine. That hippie shop. Remember?"

"Yeah," George said.

He wanted to set his head against her naked breasts and listen to her heartbeat, feel the warmth of her against him. But he might cry if he tried. When they first dated, the voices didn't exist. Once they got Dori on meds, the moods stopped. The problem was that Dori wouldn't take her medication. Said it made her feel like a loony, like a victim. George could handle her moods, her moments when she snapped. Even when she hurt and embarrassed him. But now, since Thomas, Dori's shifts grew worse. Now Dori hurt herself, threatened to hurt George. He hated to think of whether or not she threatened the children. Inside, George felt tugged in two directions. He looked at Dori again. At the white scars snaking across her breasts. He wanted to kiss them. To tell her he'd keep her safe.

"The tub's ready, love," he said, standing up.

"Thanks, Georgey."

"I'll be up in a little bit."

As George left the bathroom, Dori called to him. "I love you, Georgey. Always."

Her voice seemed to drift out of her, an echo of a whisper.

## PART TWO

Rani

The past is connected to the present in different ways. Some people say the past makes us who we are today. I disagree, to a point. At times, the past is too painful, too full of darkness and uncertainty, so we block it out, try to forget it. But I guess this blocking makes us stronger, makes us fight harder for the light in the present. For some, though, the past is better than the present so it becomes hard to forget. Doors want to be propped open so one can retreat to the past when the present becomes too chaotic. But switching back and forth wrecks havoc on the mind, on the mind's of those surrounding you too.

I can't tell anyone to forget the past because that's like trying to control someone's emotions. I mean, how someone feels shouldn't have to be justified or explained to another person. It helps, granted, but it isn't necessary. Sometimes things just can't be explained. Instead, things just happen and you find yourself holding on to them and trying not to let go, even when the good thing turns into something bad. Just like those flowers people get at proms or birthdays or anniversaries. They end up stuffing them into a scrapbook, in a dictionary under the word "love," or even in a box.

Momma has tons of those boxes. They're even labeled. Prom with Joe. First date with David. Daddy's funeral. When Momma got the flowers, they were beautiful living roses and daisies and carnations with soft petals and a sweet scent. Over time, the petals shriveled and browned, the scent became mixed with a decomposing, moldy smell. But still, the flower remained. Never to be forgotten. That's how the past is sometimes.

## Old Man Diatro

Gus knew Dori when her feet were dusted with beach sand, her skin red from the sun, and her pigtails bleached blond. Her momma never did have enough sense to keep a hat on the child's head; her momma didn't have enough sense to dress herself much less her children. The riding lawn mower hummed beneath Gus as he zoned in the early morning air. It would be hot today. Beach weather. Eleanor, his wife, would get on him about drinking more than eight glasses of water. As it was, his pee ran clear all day long. Even though he had full control of his bladder, he sometimes felt like an infant, having to pee more than three times a day. He read somewhere that if you peed more than that number, you had a problem. Gus felt his face grin. He could tell Eleanor she was forcing him into Depends. Somehow, he didn't think she'd see the humor. Eleanor didn't like to think about getting old. But they were. She and Gus. Old. The grandparents of the neighborhood. The great grandparents.

Their daughter, Katie, was about the same age as Dori. The two would sit on the floor of the screen porch, playing with dolls. He trimmed the roses, pruned the orange trees, cut the grass, and watered the gardens, all in the time it took Katie and Dori to figure out which dress should go on which doll. Eleanor made the dresses with fabric leftover from her quilts. Smock-like dresses in bright greens, pale blues, and butter yellow. Gus loved that butter yellow quilt Eleanor made for him. Its edges worn soft with use, holes repaired several times with Eleanor's steady hand and a sharp needle. Dori's brain was right then. She loved to turn cartwheels and she screamed while Gus tossed his lasso and caught her or one of his own children. Sometimes she'd bring Gus shells or a small piece of driftwood. He gave her oranges in return and she sat with Katie on the porch, juice dribbling down her chin. Gus

knew his long-time friend, Judge, felt blessed to have Dori as a daughter, even though his wife had begun to slip away. It started during Beth-Anne's pregnancy. She denied the whole thing. Coming into the bar where Gus relaxed with a few of the guys after work. He just wanted a beer. Dori's momma wanted sex.

"Well, lookie-here!" Beth-Anne waddled over to the bar. "How y'all doing?" She sidled up to Gus and seemed to stare into the neck of his beer bottle.

Her breasts pulled at the thin fabric of her dress. A dress yanked to her mid-thigh by the swell of her stomach. Some women looked god-awful during their pregnancy—swollen ankles, spidery veins stretching across once beautiful legs, and pudgy fingers. But Beth-Anne's body reacted to pregnancy just as well as her mind—denial. Aside from the bulge in the front of her dress, she just looked like a big breasted woman with toothpick legs.

"Hey, Beth-Anne," Roger, one of the regulars at the bar, smiled at her and tipped his beer.

Gus stared at Roger, at his too-tanned skin and unshaven face and shook his eyes. Roger shrugged his shoulders and set his beer down on the crowded bar. Ashtrays, bowls of peanuts, and crumpled, once square, napkins littered the area in front of them.

"One of you gonna buy me one of them beers?" Beth-Anne leaned against the bar between the two, sticking her rear out. Damn that dress was short.

Gus went to the payphone wedged between the doors to the bathrooms and called the Judge. He had to call the Judge every Friday he went into the bar. The thought occurred to him not to go anymore, to simply buy some beer to drink at home. But Eleanor didn't like beer in the house and somehow it just didn't taste the same when he was sitting on the couch



with pillows Eleanor stitched together and an afghan behind his back. And well, maybe Gus worried that if he didn't come to the bar, someone would buy Beth-Anne the beer, someone would forget to call Judge. And what would happen to Beth-Anne? To the baby? Eleanor gave birth to Katie a few months earlier. Gus knew. He knew about babies and women and short dresses.

He reached up underneath his hat and scratched at his hair and sweat as he swung the lawn mower around the corner of the yard. Yup, Dori was normal enough. Gus used to think he helped save her. Rescued her from Beth-Anne's curse. But the mind can't be caught. Dori got just as twisted as Beth-Anne. Slipped. Disappeared. Gone. At least she hadn't killed herself like Beth-Anne had.

Judge called Gus when it happened. Made him come over and help. Judge couldn't do it. Couldn't go back into their bedroom and look at her. Beth-Anne did it on the bed. Stripped off her clothes, her body spread across both sides of the bed, her wrists slit. White sheets gone red. Blood like strawberry jam. Maybe that's why Gus liked blueberry better. He always related strawberries to Beth-Anne. Jagged cuts, pale and tight skin. Her hair, full black curls, splayed across the pillows. A face that didn't look peaceful. Whoever said death made people look like they were sleeping never saw Beth-Anne on that bed. In Judge's bed. In a marriage bed.

The lawnmower bounced and Gus roused himself from his memories. Or at least he tried. *Can't change the past.* The leaves on the orange trees shook in shudders and breaths as the breeze crept in from the ocean, sliding around houses and groves. Gus licked the sweat

from his upper lip, squinted his eyes ahead at the grass, and let his mind ease back into its memory.

They warned Judge. They all told him he was more crazy than her for getting married. But Judge suffered from the same weakness as Gus and now George. Thinking they could save people. But who needed saving? Judge should've saved himself. Put himself in the grave instead. Never did get over Beth-Anne's death. Or having to raise Dori by himself. A little girl who looked nothing like her mother. She was round like Judge. Soft cheeks, pale hair, and sliding gray eyes. But her mind. Dori got her mother's mind. That finally killed Judge. Gave him a heart attack a year and a half after his second grandchild was born. Dori and Rosaline both touched in the head. Not Rani, though.

Gus stopped the mower underneath an orange tree. The grove began twenty-five yards from the house. Forty-two trees. There used to be fifty but over the years disease and pure survival of the fittest took over. But the forty-two offered more than enough for the neighborhood. Maybe that's why he got to be the grandfather of the street. Of Palmetto Avenue. Maybe it was the oranges. Either that or his lasso.

## George

He remembered when Dori wanted to go to St. Augustine as often as she could. Dori liked walking down St. George Street. Always, she teased him, asking him if he was a saint, wondering how it felt to have a street named after him and how she felt so special to be walking with him, holding his hands, receiving a personal blessing. During the summer months, the street, blocked from motor vehicle use, was packed with tourists. And when Flagler College was in session, students, with their pierced noses, tiny camisole shirts, and baggy pants, walked up and down the street, going into shops during the day or hanging out in the courtyards or on the benches at night. The cobblestone road and the coquina buildings gave the street an out-of-time feel to it. As if when people walked on the street, they could pull away from the external things, the life they usually led, and they could become a separate entity. Not just a tourist, but actually lost in time and stuck amidst saints and horses and what now seemed like simplicity.

One night, George and Dori ate dinner at a small cafe and then walked off St. George Street toward the fort. Dori had been quiet. Not spell-setting-in-quiet, but quiet enough to make George wonder. He wanted her to talk of her own will, but he knew it wouldn't happen. Instead, he knew he would have to pull at her thoughts. *Talk to me, love. Please.* The moments of silence were overwhelming. Sometimes it felt good enough just to walk next to her, to catch her scent of tangerines mixed with the ocean breeze, to feel the warmth of her body brushing against his own. But tonight, George felt as if the silence was squeezing them, was demanding a huge amount of space George wasn't ready to give up. He relented to his emotions and found the strength to start the conversation once again.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"What?"

Dori looked at him with confusion. She dropped his hand and wrapped her arms across her chest, slowing their pace to a mere shuffle.

"I mean, what do you want? With your life? With you?"

"I . . . I don't know," she said.

"Yeah you do." George pushed her hair behind her shoulders, studying her face under the streetlight. "Come on. Tell me."

"No one's ever asked," Dori shrugged. "I want . . . what do I want?"

They walked down the road in silence. Random cars passed around the curve of the road, their headlights creating bright arcs across their bodies and requiring a constant balance of the eyes between light and dark. A horse and carriage clopped past them and out of habit, George held his breath. He put his hands in the pockets of his khakis and waited. He wanted her to know, wanted her to tell him what she really wanted. But did he even know what he wanted? Yes. A family. Children running around and a wife, Dori, to stay home and read to them and bake cookies. And George would be able to write. Not just editorials, but short stories and poems. He'd be able to write the words floating in his head. And Dori would listen to him, would kiss him and hold him close to her body. He would do anything to give Dori what she wanted.

"I want freedom," she said.

George hesitated in midstride. Freedom? Did she feel that trapped by her children? Two beautiful girls. Judge gave her freedom, allowed her to live like a woman without two young girls. What type of freedom?

She continued, "I want someone who will love me but who will let me go. I hate those clingy types. It feels so nice to breathe, Georgey. You know?"

He nodded, but inside he felt panic. Did he cling? Was she talking about him? How much freedom did she need? Dori pulled at his arm and slid her hand into his. Her hands were cool, soft.

"I want to go sit on the wall," she said.

Dori loved the historic buildings in St. Augustine. The fort sprawled across a green lawn on the bayfront. At night, couples walked on the fort's outer walls and hid in the shadows created by the spotlights aimed on the inner walls. Drinking, drugs, sex, love, friendship. So many emotions were experienced on the old walls. George and Dori sat on the wall, their legs swinging over the water beneath them. A breeze came around the island and swept down the bayfront. Dori scooted closer to George.

"It's so beautiful," she whispered.

"I want to make you happy. I want to be with you always," George said.

He felt his heart race, felt the sweat under his arms. While he waited for her response, he stared at the Bridge of Lions, at the small lights outlining the bridge's expanse across the water. Cars made their way back and forth across the small drawbridge, but the scene felt far away. Instead, George stared at the boats in the water. Or rather he stared at the shadows of the boats against the night sky. Sailboats and a houseboat. The glow from the moon created

a rippling path across the water. George thought of jumping onto the glowing path and taking off. Running away.

“What? George . . . I, you. I’m the only one who can make me happy. I don’t know if—”

“—But I could help. I want—”

“—George, wait. What if—”

“I don’t want to wait. I love you. God, I love you.” He gripped her hand thinking, please don’t let go, please don’t try to let go.

“No. Listen.” Dori smacked her free hand against the wall. “I just don’t know if. George. My spells. My moments. I don’t know if I want to be with anyone.”

“But Dori—”

“Listen,” she turned to him and stared hard at his face before continuing. “My dad. People tell me my dad was amazing—”

“He is,” George said.

“—but I watch my dad when he doesn’t know it. When he thinks I’m upstairs with Rosaline or Mariella. He’s, my dad, is . . . he’s so sad, George. So—lost. And I don’t want to do that to someone. I just don’t.”

“Baby, you won’t.” George tried to wrap his arms around her shoulders, but Dori pushed at him.

“You can’t promise that. Can you? You can’t promise things you don’t know for sure.”

“But I’ll be that way if you won’t let me love you. Don’t you see that? I’ll be sad and lost if you force me to walk away. If you don’t let me hold you close. If you don’t let me make you laugh. If you don’t let me help you through one of your spells. It’s when I’m not with you that I go crazy. And I’ll even give you your freedom. I swear. I just—I just want to know that you’ll love me. Dori, love me. Please.”

By now, sweat stained the underarms of George’s shirt and a streak began to appear down the center of his back. What would she say? *Love me, Dori. Love me.* Again, he stared at the line of water the moon had set aglow. A yellow rippling amid the darkness of the water. Like light streaking across oil. How long would it take to swim across the bay? Sometimes, when they came to St. Augustine during the day, they saw dolphins in the bay. If he tried to swim across, would the dolphins be with him? George wiped his hand over his face. I’m getting delusional. Losing my fucking mind. Listen to her. To yourself.

“I do love you,” she said. Dori sighed, wrapped her arms around her body and kicked her heels against the wall. “Really, Georgey. I love you. I’m just—it’s so . . . I’m afraid. What if . . . what if the spells get worse? How can you—how can we be sure that it won’t get worse?”

“The doctors said—”

“George, the doctors just want to keep me medicated. I’m not going to take pills the rest of my life. I can’t—”

“But if they help you—”

"They make me so out of it. I can't take care of the girls when I take the pills. And my episodes . . . they don't happen that often. Not now. But it could get worse. And what if it does? What then? Will you still love me?"

"I'll always love you. You're my Dori-girl. Come on."

"I don't know. How do you know? I mean, how can you be so sure? There are so many girls out there, George. Girls who would love to go out with you. How can you be sure about me?"

"Cause I stopped looking at those girls. Because I love you. And I love Rosaline and Mariella. I want to be with you. All of you."

Dori wrapped her arms tighter around her thin body. The humidity made her hair frizz in tight curls angled around her face. He wanted to hold her. At the same time, he wanted to run. Felt like stopping one of the passing cars and getting a lift back to his own car parked near the college. No. Stay, hold her. Love her. Love me.

"Are you certain?" she asked.

His tongue felt trapped, dry against the roof of his mouth. Instead, George smiled and slipped his arms around her. He waited for her arms to loosen from around her body and slide around his own. When she did this, George pulled her tighter to him.

"I'm certain," he said into her hair. "I'm certain."

"You're fucked up man. Completely fucked up." Andrew set the green beer bottle on the counter with an exasperated thunk. He had been George's friend since high school and he still hadn't changed from then.



George sat on the barstool and stared at the box on the counter. Half of his savings sat in the box. A small gold band with a decent sized diamond. He wanted a round one set into the band so there wouldn't be any sharp edges. Just in case. The ring had nestled itself into the pocket of his pants. And for the past week, the ring was switched into several different pockets. He still hadn't found the balls to ask her. Now his good buddy was trying to talk him out of it. George wanted to tell him to shut up. To tell Andrew he was wrong. But instead, George continued to sit in the smoky bar and drink his cherry soda, listening to Andrew ramble.

"Don't be like that," George said.

"You want me to lie?" Andrew asked. "I can lie to you man. But I won't." He took a long drink of his beer and nodded the bottle toward George. "If you marry her, you'll start drinking again and you'll--"

"I'll what? Don't even tell me you were gonna make a reference to her state of mind? She isn't crazy Andrew. She isn't."

"Hey," Andrew held up his hands and shrugged his shoulders. "You said it."

"Fuck you," George chomped on a bit of ice and shook his head.

Andrew stared at the television, distracted by a basketball game. Without paying attention, he grabbed at the buffalo wings with his chubby fingers and pulled the meat off the bone with his teeth. George stared at the wedding ring on Andrew's finger. He'd been the best man at Andrew's wedding two years ago. What was Andrew's wife doing right now, George thought. Did she go out with the girls? Is she waiting for him at home? Will they

have sex? George chomped on more ice and propped his elbows on the counter. He loved Dori. He did.

“Just because you love her doesn’t mean she’s the one,” Andrew said over the remnants of a buffalo wing.

“Jesus,” George grabbed a piece of celery from the plate and munched on it. The celery was warm and the strings stuck in his teeth.

“I’m serious. It doesn’t. You could have anyone. Why’d you pick the most fucked up girl?”

“You’re nice. Ya know? Really nice. I freaking come here to tell you I’m gonna do it and you try to talk me out of it. What the hell?”

“I told you I wasn’t gonna lie to you. I’m not going back on that now just because I’m telling you stuff you don’t want to hear. It’s like—you’ve had this crush—this fascination with Dori for years. Since high school. And you came back from college and it’s still there. This idea that she’s so wonderful. Well, George. Hate to break it to you, but she isn’t. She freaking sleeps with everybody and she doesn’t give a damn about those girls and she still hasn’t tried to get out of that house. I mean, why bother when you got a dad who can take care of you--”

“Shut up,” George said. “Just shut the fuck up.”

“What--”

“I shouldn’t have come here. This was a waste of my time.” George pulled his wallet out of his pocket and dropped a few bills on the counter. He still needed to go back to the paper and check the layout for the morning’s paper. Or maybe that was his excuse and he just

didn't want to sit around and listen to Andrew slam Dori. His Dori. What the hell did Andrew know anyway?

"I slept with her. You know that?"

"What?" George sat back on the stool, feeling as if Andrew had sat on his chest.

"Yeah. When you were at school. We were at the beach. Big party. Got ripping drunk. It just happened."

"It just happened. And you're waiting to tell me now because? I can't believe I call you my friend. What the hell is that? My friend? Fuck, you gonna ram a machete up my ass while you're at it?"

Andrew laughed, his mouth coated with hot sauce and a dab of blue cheese.

George sighed and stood again. "You're a sick fuck. I love her. I'm gonna ask her to marry me. Don't fuck this up for me."

"You—yeah, fine," Andrew waved his hand at George. "Fine."

"Fine," George said.

He grabbed his coat off the back of the stool and slid out of the bar. Outside, he sucked large gulps of fresh air. This couldn't be happening. He was so sure. So positive she was the one. He still was. She had to be. There hadn't been anyone else. At school, he worked for a paper in Orlando and his free time was dedicated to producing a column and overseeing other interns. Between working at the paper and commuting home to see Dori, he had no time for other women. But did he really see Dori then? George stopped and leaned his arms on the top of his car. When he came home, she was waiting for him on occasion. More often, he got stuck watching his parents read at either end of the sofa, waiting for Dori

to call or show up at his doorstep. He'd sit with a soda in his hand and his legs propped on the coffee table, waiting. Always waiting. But she'd come by. Dori always came back. George knew he could count on her return, count on that one bit of consistency.

She slept with Andrew? God, what am I doing. Thoughts slammed their way through George's mind. It felt like he couldn't get enough air and he gulped again.

"Hey, George. Man, wait up," Andrew lumbered across the parking lot. "Man, I'm sorry. I was a little out of line."

George took a gulp of air and shook his head. "It's all right. You were just calling it as you see it."

"Still doesn't make it right. And I shouldn't have told you about what happened. We were both drunk. It wasn't a big deal. George, man, if she makes you happy, go ahead. I mean, you love her. You know what you're getting into. Guess you don't need me hounding you."

"Yeah," George said. "But thanks for being honest. Really." George gripped Andrew's upper arm and nodded. "Really."

"All right then. Gotta get home. Michelle is waiting for me."

George slid behind the wheel of his car and continued to sit there long after Andrew pulled his own car out of the parking lot and honked his horn.

That all happened five years ago. Nothing had changed. He still loved Dori. And she—she still existed in her own world, in her own mind. George couldn't leave. Couldn't back out on the commitment he made. He knew that inside of her mind, she still existed. What he didn't

know was the he secretly waited, hoped that one day she would turn her eyes on him and smile, tell him everything would be okay. Or maybe he did know that. What he really wouldn't admit was that he knew that day would never happen. He knew that Dori had lost her battle. That was something George would never admit.

## Dori

Thomas used to always cry and hold onto her. Late at night, she'd hold her hands over his mouth, begging him to stop crying. Georgey would come and take him. Slap her hands away from the baby's mouth and scoop him into his arms. Walk around outside with him, under the trees and Spanish moss. She could hear him singing the songs he begged her to sing to their child. But why do it if he could? Smell that baby sweet smell. Of wipes and ointment those church ladies always brought over. Nosing around the house. Cleaning here and there. Bet they take stuff too. Take my Momma's things. Or snoop around in the attic. Daddy's stuff is in the attic. Snoopy religious freaks. I should ask them. But they'd get mad. No more brownies. I like those brownies. As long as they leave out the walnuts. Some damn woman always wants to try to make sweets healthy. Like it makes a difference. You're still serving freaking chocolate. And Roz likes that lasagna that one family brings. What's their name? Better not accuse them. Hell, I already know the truth. Why rub their noses in it. Sing to Thomas, George. Sing to our baby. Even if you don't put Thomas to sleep, it'll let me drift off. Rosaline. It isn't the girl, really, who makes me hate her, but her father. Her face. Rosaline's face. Looks just like her Daddy's. I loved him once. Before he started telling me I needed to get some help. Called me absent-minded. Young, that's all I told him.

Mariella's daddy, Joe, wanted to marry Dori. She thought he just wanted to make his baby legitimate. Dori didn't see how that would change anything. Still too young, dammit. No. Not marrying him. He'd just want more babies if she did that. Instead, she started leaving. Taking off in the mornings. Just like now. Leaving that one who's living in her garage. Georgey. She couldn't remember marrying him. The small ceremony they had. He

tells her about it all the time. Pictures. Shows her wrinkly pictures. Of her kids standing there in awkward dress clothes. Thrift store clothes. Or hand-me-downs the church ladies brought. Her kids wearing other kids' clothes. So stupid. I only have two kids. Cashmere. I had a cashmere sweater once. Daddy bought it for me. With buttons up the front and pale green ribbon running underneath them. Soft against my skin. Like the top of Thomas' head after Mariella gives him a bath. Mariella. Why do all my children look like their daddies? George, Joe, and Marc.

Dori wondered if she gave anything to her children. At times, she feared she gave them her mind. Always wandering. Never focusing. George told her to concentrate. To focus on things and the confusion would stop. Things would slide into place. Dori wanted to tell him that it was the pills. The pills made sense. Taking the pills. One pill, two pill. Weddings. I can't remember any weddings. But images from before I can remember. Like Rosaline's daddy. The tight feeling of salty skin dried and warmed from the sun. Wet sand underneath me. His lips on my face, cold from the water. Being sixteen.

"Come on, Dori girl. Let's go swimming." Marc called to her from the water, already waist deep.

She hated the ocean, but she wanted to follow him. Be next to him. He played football. Stood tall and solid over her. He had a cleft in his chin. Always wondered how he managed to shave his face without nicking himself there. Told her how beautiful she was. How sexy. And she did have a body. A woman's body. She could flaunt it, but he told her he liked it in private better. Made sure she stayed covered up when they went out at night. Didn't like the other boys staring at her.

Her mother dead, daddy always at work, and her sisters keeping to themselves, pushed Dori to this boy. Even when he pushed aside her dress in the back of his car. Pushed aside her panties too. That burning feeling of being driven into. He held her gently, so she swallowed back the tears and pretended she liked it. Saying it felt nice. Real nice. But when he dropped her off, she washed herself fiercely. Dirty, dirty girl. Don't tell Daddy you ruined your department store underwear. She swore she'd never let him do that again. But when he kissed her behind the ears and told her he wanted to marry her, she pulled his hips between her legs and smiled. Because he loved her.

She got pregnant that year; she was only sixteen. Marc didn't ask her to get married. He waved good-bye to me. He had on a uniform and waved good-bye. He gave me money. Told me to get rid of it. Like it wasn't a person, but a blob inside my tummy. But he was just scared. He'd come back. That's a lie. I fucked up. He wasn't coming back to me because I fucked it all up.

Dirty whore, her sisters called her. Nothing but a dirty whore. Sixteen and pregnant. Her belly swelling. Feeling tight. And the way she would sprawl out on the porch at night and it would feel as if the baby was pushing down on her chest, on her heart, making breathing, making feeling, difficult. The way her daddy stared down at her. Sometimes through her, but she'd catch the times his eyes rested on her. Only for a minute. *Love me, Daddy. I'm so sorry. So sorry. Just love me.*

"Can I get you anything, Dori?"

"No, daddy." She smiled at him. A soft smile that he probably couldn't see because the porch light was off and there were no street lights on their road back then.



“How are you feeling?” Her father sat down on the porch step and rested his elbows on his knees.

She pushed herself up. Scooted over to him and crossed her arms over her round belly. “I’m scared, Daddy.”

“You should be. My little girl. Dori—”

She watched him bite his lips. Silence. He keeps quiet and my sisters scream enough to make up for it. He wants to hit me. Slap me like he did when he caught me sneaking out of the house. Or shake me like he did when I first told him I had a baby in my belly. He only did it for a minute. He cried. He didn’t mean to do it. He shouted then. Cursed at me. Asked me how I could sleep with that boy without getting married first? And why couldn’t I wait to finish high school? Dori has skipped grades in elementary school and only had half a year left of high school. And now she needed to withdraw because they couldn’t have a pregnant girl at school. Especially the judge’s pregnant girl. He was the judge. The judge, dammit.

“Daddy. I—” Tell him your sorry. But I’m not. I’m not sorry. I want this baby. Maybe her daddy will come back.

Daddy’s dead. Dead. Momma’s dead. My sisters never said they were sorry. Rosaline never said she was sorry to me. Sorry for hating me. I looked like momma. Even though I styled my hair a different way. Even though I’d go flirt with the boys. Even got high. Never told daddy that. Couldn’t have everyone hating me. Didn’t sleep with all those boys. George thinks I did. Yelled at me for it. But dammit I don’t. Just slept with a few. And most of them got me pregnant. They held me when Rosaline’s daddy wouldn’t.

The other boys wouldn't mention Rosaline. Didn't seem to mind her at all. But they wouldn't come to Dori's house. Said that her sisters would scream at them if they ever tried when she wasn't home. Holler down from the upstairs window. They couldn't ever see them. Just ghost-like voices coming from behind the drapes. Damn her sisters. Peter—he had gorgeous eyes and knew how to surf. He got mad because I wouldn't sleep with him. Told me I was easy. Why was she pretending to be such a goodie-goodie? She had a baby, didn't she? He was the only one who brought up Rosaline. Brought up her girl. The one who she stayed home to take care of. Only went out at night when daddy was home. When daddy would agree to watch her. Get all mad at first, but she noticed the way he played with her. So she'd leave without hesitating.

I loved Rosaline. But she'd get so heavy in my arms. Such a big girl and she always wanted me to hold her. The baby would be fine with everyone else if you just set her on a blanket, but Dori had to hold her. Even in the summer time when the humidity stuck to her skin and clothes, and Rosaline just made it worse, hung on tight like she was afraid she was gonna drop her. Silly kid. Just like her daddy. Clinging tight to me. But her daddy left. I let him go. Can't let Rosaline go. But I did.

"Momma?" Thomas' voice called from behind the bedroom door.

Dori jerked herself out of the past. "Whaddya want Thomas?"

"Momma? Can I come in?"

"Come on in sweetheart."

The door cracked open and Thomas peeked his head through. "Hi, Momma."

His blonde cow-lick stuck up on the back of his head in a casual, leaning arc. His little, round belly stuck out over his jeans. He needed a belt. She could see his underwear. The red band and cartoon characters.

“Where’s your shirt?”

“I dunno,” Thomas crawled onto the bed beside his mother. “I’m hungry.”

“Isn’t Mariella downstairs?” She snuggled under the covers and turned her back to him.

“No. She had to stay at school today. Told me she was gonna be late.”

“What for?”

“I dunno.” Thomas picked at a loose thread on the bedspread. “What can I eat?”

“Where’s your shirt?”

“I can’t eat my shirt,” Thomas laughed.

“Don’t you get silly with me,” Dori pushed herself up onto her elbows and glanced at the clock. It was almost four o’clock. “Why don’t you go get your daddy?”

“He isn’t in the garage.”

“You sure?”

Thomas nodded, his big blue eyes unblinking, his cow-lick bobbing along in agreement.

“Why didn’t you say so?” Dori swung herself out of the bed and headed for the door. The silver bracelets around her wrist chimed in her haste and she pushed her hair away from her face, tying the long blonde mass into a knot at the nape of her neck.

“Momma?”

“What?” she stopped at the door. “Aren’t you hungry?”

“Yeah. But—” Thomas giggled. “You’re naked, Momma.”

“Oh, damn,” Dori grinned and went to her dresser. She pulled on a long, loose skirt and a T-shirt. Grabbing the bottle from the top of the dresser, she twisted it open and popped two pills into her mouth. Stop the voices. Make it straight. Cook for Tommy. Make it straight. Swallowing, she turned to Thomas. “Let’s go get some food.”

“Okay,” Thomas jumped on the bed and bounded off toward his mother.

“I have a rabbit for a son.”

“No. I’m a kangaroo. Kangaroo starts with the letter “K”. I learned that in school today.”

“You’re so smart.”

“No,” Thomas laughed. “The other kids know how to spell the word. I just know what it starts with. The letter “K”. And you make it like this.” His finger traced the letter ‘k’ in the air.

### Old Man Diatro

Mr. Diatro pushed himself out of the lawn chair and stretched. Scratching at the stubble underneath his chin, he yawned. The afternoon humidity clung to his armpits and to the seat of his pants. Really, he needed to go into the house and change. But inside, his wife would have the air conditioner blasting. A man could catch a chill in that house. Change and come back outside? Change and walk around the backyard. A few of the orange trees could use some pruning. Late afternoon. A few hours left of sun. Why bother changing?

He folded the chair and set it against the porch railing. As he bent to pick up his lasso, the front door opened.

“Are you done terrorizing those children?”

“What?” he stood smiling, the lasso hiding behind his back. “Did the cops call? Are they coming for me?”

“You’re a sick old man.” His wife crossed her arms and pursed her lips together.

“When they do come for you, I’ll be sure to unlock the door and let them on in. Do you think they like their tea sweet or unsweet?”

“Wouldn’t you miss me, Eleanor?”

“Get in here before you dehydrate.” She backed away from the door and ushered her husband inside.

“Good God, what’s the temperature in here?” he squinted, as if he could see the thermostat across the room. “Where’s the meat?”

“Do you want water or tea?”

“Do you have some lemons? I could go get some if you don’t.”

“We still have some. Water then?”

“Yup. Thanks.” He opened the closet in the foyer and set his lasso on a hook.

In the kitchen, Eleanor hummed to herself as she fixed two glasses of ice water with lemon slices. She filled one glass with ice and only dropped a few cubes in the other glass. Ice hurt her teeth, but Gus loved the stuff. Arms circled around her as she sliced the lemons.

“You didn’t catch that Hewitt boy, did you?”

His arms tightened around her waist and he rested his chin on her shoulder. “It’s harmless, Eleanor. I’ve been doing it for years now.”

“But that Hewitt boy is different, Gus. I keep telling you that. You’re liable to frighten that kid to death.”

“Frighten?” Gus added more wrinkles to his forehead as he raised his eyebrows.

“Give him some attention that he needs, maybe.”

“Then why don’t you dig up one of the boys’ old baseball gloves. I’m sure there’s a ton of them in the garage. Play some ball with him.”

“But I used to lasso the boys and they loved it. Even Katie liked it.”

“Lassoing your own children is different.”

Eleanor turned and kissed him on the cheek. He was nearing eighty, but he still looked sixty. White hair cut short around his ears and neck, faded green eyes glowing behind his wire-rimmed glasses, and he still stood straight even though he probably had shrunk to six feet even. She kissed him again.

"Times are different, Gus. I know you enjoy it. And half the children do. But one of these days, you're going to get a child whose parents don't think it's a game. They'll call the cops on you."

"The guys down there know me. They'll let the parents know it's just a game."

"Gus—"

"Come outside with me." He grabbed the glasses of ice water and nodded his head toward the backdoor.

Outside, they sat in the lawn furniture next to the little pond Gus had made years earlier.

"Why, it isn't as warm as I thought." Eleanor sipped at her water.

Gus smiled at his wife, his love. "How was your luncheon today?"

"It wasn't too bad. I don't know why I go to those silly things. Bunch of women gossiping." Eleanor took another sip of her water, swirling the lemon and ice with her index finger. "They started talking about the Hewitt children again. It's so sad, really. Dori's just getting worse. She should be in the hospital."

Gus stared across the yard toward the orange grove. He remembered Dori running around the trees, both small. She would sing songs to the bugs she found and follow Gus down the rows. He couldn't put his finger on an exact moment when he knew Dori's mind was slipping. Somehow, it just started to happen. Just like her mother.

Eleanor continued, "She doesn't take care of those children. That's what hurts. What makes me want to cry." Eleanor sighed. "Those poor children, Gus."

"They're getting older now. Aren't they?" he asked.

“Not Thomas. Poor child needs help. Learning disabled. Jane told me about it. Her daughter teaches him. Second time through kindergarten. Who has to take kindergarten twice?”

Gus shifted himself on the wooden recliner. He needed to sand down the furniture. A piece of wood poked his lower back and if he ran his hand over the wood, he'd be sure to pick up one or two splinters at least.

Eleanor continued, “And that older girl, what's her name? She's off dancing somewhere. Probably at Cafe Erotica. Some place cheap. Roseanne? No. Rosaline. That's her name. Always was a little on the strange side. But it wasn't her fault. The girl needed a mother.” A pause. The last remnants of ice clinking against her glass.

Gus closed his eyes and breathed deep. Fresh cut grass flavored the air, even though no lawn mowers could be heard. He liked to cut his own grass. Most of the neighbors hired in a crew to do it. Laziness, Gus thought.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Of course, sweetheart.” Gus opened his eyes and blinked at his wife.

She recrossed her legs, a soft, delicate ankle and the high arc of her bare foot suspended in the air next to his hand. He could reach out and touch it. Feel the soft skin. Imagine the smell of his wife's lotion. Vanilla. She smelled like vanilla. Really, the lotion did. But she smelled of so much more. Of the baby powder she used on the children years ago. Of sweet chocolate or baking bread and yeast. Or blueberry pie. Eleanor would bake a pie just for him, the warm, sugary smell filling the house. The arch of her foot, the curve of her bone. A woman. Still beautiful. Love. His love.



“Gus?”

“The Hewitt children. It’s the younger girl I worry about. If she’ll make it. Never have I seen a child with such deep expressions.” The edges of his mouth formed a small, gentle smile. “Except when I met you.”

“Oh, Gus.” Eleanor smiled back at her husband. She reached over and squeezed his forearm.

“I love you,” he whispered.

The setting sun glowed across Eleanor’s face. Love. He loved her soft, gray hair, cut around her chin like a child’s. The wrinkles around her eyes and around her mouth, not harsh lines from the sun, but more like an artist’s gentle strokes in order to show age and laughter. The casual turn of her nose, which she always hated, hiding her profile with her hand, hair, or tilt of her head. The secret folds of her ears that he could still kiss and enjoy a reaction from her. The way she laughed.

“I won’t lasso any more children.”

Eleanor closed her eyes and shook her head at him. At the end of the day, he always whispered those words, always told her he would stop. For her. He said it for her.

## Rani

Rani sat on the kitchen floor coloring with Thomas. The papers were spread in front of them with pictures of the ocean, the palm trees, and of Thomas. Rani was practicing portraits, using Thomas as a willing participant. Except of course he always moved. But she liked watching him anyway. How good could she draw with crayons? Thomas tried his own portrait of Rani and ran to put it on the fridge. He'd drawn her long black hair and he even chose a good color to depict her eyes.

From the refrigerator, Rani's eyes slid to Rosaline as she paraded into the room. She wore a little bathrobe and slippers. The perfume wafted through the room as Rosaline pranced around. Thomas' nose crinkled and Rani shook her eyes at him before he had a chance to open his mouth and complain about the smell. He hated perfume.

"Where's George?" Rosaline asked.

Rani twirled a crayon on the corner of one of her drawings. Her sister always wore little skimpy shit around the house. Rosaline had been dancing at different clubs since she graduated high school four years ago. She said she needed to mentally prepare herself for work. Skimpy clothes were apparently the preparation she needed. Teddies, little short robes, see-through nightgowns. And the makeup was thick across Rosaline's cheeks and eyes and especially her lips. Rani always thought of mannequins and clowns.

"Do you know where he is?" Rosaline asked again.

"Out. With Momma."

"Oh. Well, damn." Rosaline slammed the refrigerator door and leaned against the counter. "How long have they been gone?"

"I'm not sure," Rani stretched her neck. She wanted to get out of the house but she needed to stay with Thomas. She sat rooted to the spot, feeling as if her body was getting heavier.

"Anyone ever tell you how useless you are?" Rosaline asked as she walked out of the kitchen.

"Only you," Rani whispered under her breath.

Thomas blinked at Rani, a crayon held motionless in his hand.

She made a face at him. "Ready for your bath? I'll race you."

Thomas bolted from the kitchen and Rani followed him. They thundered up the stairs and Rani was relieved that Rosaline had the bedroom door closed. In the bathroom, Thomas plugged the tub and Rani used the shampoo to create bubbles. Thomas went in search of some toys he could use in the water and Rani let her hands swirl through the bubbles.

Car doors closed and George's voice filtered through the open window. Rani turned off the water to hear better. Something about medication. Her mother cursing at him, yelling about being in a hospital. A loony bin. Rani put the water back on as she heard them coming upstairs.

"Mommy," Thomas shouted.

"Not now," Dori said.

Thomas came into the bathroom, his fingers jammed into his mouth and his other arm filled with toys. To run, to scream, to shake her mother. All the urges crept in and vanished.

"She's just tired," Rani started the lies. "She had to have some tests. Remember how you had to have tests? She just wants some sleep. She loves you, kiddo."

He crawled into the tub and Rani soon had him laughing with all the different voices she used with his toys. They were lost in the swirls of bubbles and toys and slippery skin. George came and stood in the doorway. He laughed as Thomas gave himself a bubble beard. It was almost pleasant. Then Rosaline opened the bedroom door.

“Rani?” she called out.

Rani felt her head drop. She stared into the tub, at Thomas and his smiling face. In the bathroom doorway, Rosaline appeared. This time, her robe was open to reveal a bra and panties.

“Oh, George. I thought you were out,” Rosaline said.

*Don't look, don't look.* But Rani looked. Noticed how Rosaline didn't pull her robe closed. Noticed how she brushed her body against George as she came into the bathroom and pretended to search for something in the medicine cabinet. Rani noticed the way George began to blush. How he shifted uncomfortably, but how he didn't leave.

Someone was knocking on the front door. The knocking, steady on the wood, made Rani want to run from the house.

“That's Justus, Tommy. I'll see you in the morning.” In the doorway, she glanced at George's feet. Pale feet with perfect toenails. “Can you finish for me?”

“Um, yeah. Sure.”

Rani grabbed her backpack off the floor of her bedroom and ran for the door.

Inside Justus' truck, Rani felt herself relax. She sunk into the seat and stared out the window. They'd been best friends for five years and he always comforted her, gave her a place where she could be herself.

"You sure you don't mind going?" he asked.

"It's fine. I'll get some sketching done. Mr. Blevins wanted me to work on portraits."

Rani thought about the party and knew that Justus would end up dancing and she would roam around the house sketching people. That's what she always did at parties. Caught what she saw on paper or sat outside and stared at the sky.

"Geek." Justus flipped through the radio stations. "How are those applications going?"

Rani felt herself tense. She hadn't filled out any of the college applications. They'd been sitting on her desk for weeks. For some reason, she couldn't open the envelopes. And she couldn't tell Justus she hadn't tried yet either.

"Rain?"

"I—sorry. Just thinking."

"Gonna share it with me?" Justus rested his hand on her thigh.

His skin felt warm, soft. Rani put her hand over his. She began to speak but then stopped. "My mom's getting worse."

"What happened this time?" Justus turned down the radio and slipped his hand back under Rani's.

"Nothing. Well—no. I guess. The medicine isn't working. And it's like she's always sad. George doesn't want her home alone anymore. He's thinking of quitting his job."

"How'd you find that out?"

"I heard him talking to Mrs. B. That woman from the church who's been helping out."

"What do you think?" Justus asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Is she gonna hurt herself? I mean—does she need to go into a home?"

"I have no idea. I mean, the thought crossed my mind. But, damn—she's my mom. Just freaks me out. Like Rosaline. She's getting more weird too."

"You need to get out of there."

"Hey," Rani said. "They're my family. A little strange, but they're my family."

"I know. Sorry. I didn't mean it that way. Look, Rain. I know you love Thomas. And I'm sure you love everyone else too. But—nevermind."

"What?" Rani stared at Tara's house, at the cars crammed into the driveway and along the street. They could hear the music and the voices coming from behind the house.

Justus drove down the road until he found a spot to park the truck. He turned the truck off and sat staring out the windshield. His long legs seemed to hug the steering wheel even though the seat was as far back as it could go. He turned and looked at her.

"I just don't want you to get stuck. You have a way out. Your art—man, your art is beautiful. It can get you out of here. Even your running could get you out. You could get an athletic scholarship like the rest of us. Sometimes I wonder if you'll throw it away because of Thomas. Or because something bad might happen with your mom. I—I just worry about you."

Rani chewed on her thumbnail. Of course he was right. But she didn't want to acknowledge it. Didn't want to think about art scholarships. Or running. She definitely didn't want to think about how Justus was getting hounded by schools wanting him to play ball. She didn't even want to acknowledge that things were getting awkward with the two of them ever since he broke up with Maria and had changed the status of their relationship. Rani didn't want to think too much about anything. She leaned across the truck and kissed Justus' cheek and then his lips.

"Ready?" she asked.

He shook his head at her. "Just gonna ignore what I said, huh?"

"No. Just gonna wait and talk about it later." Rani opened the door and got out of the truck. The ocean breeze gave her goosebumps.

"Where're your shoes, woman?" Justus grabbed her hand as they walked back toward the house.

Rani squeezed his hand and swung it through the air. She glanced down at his own feet. "Flip-flops aren't shoes."

"Don't start with me." Justus tugged on her arm, pulling her in front of him.

"I'm not afraid of you," Rani laughed as they trudged up the driveway.

"Watch out, punk. When you least expect it. I'll get you." Justus opened the door and Rani walked into the music and smoke.

It didn't take long for Justus to disappear. The music hurt Rani's ears and the smoke burned her eyes. Plus, it was too dark inside the house to draw. Rani moved out onto the deck where the bright lights were attracting the moths and people. As she pushed her way

through the crowd, she nodded her head at people as they called out to her. She didn't want to stop and talk to anyone. All she needed was a quiet spot to sit and draw.

Rani worked her way to the railing and straddled it. In the distance, she could see the ocean, the waves breaking on the shore. For the most part, though, the distance was hidden in darkness. People danced around her and jumped into the pool and the hot tub. Voices varied in volume—laughter, whispers, screams. Out of her backpack, Rani got her sketchbook and some charcoal pencils. She went to work sketching people's facial expressions. Hard to make laughter look different than crying. Difficult also to get the sexual look as opposed to anger. Soon, her fingers began to blacken as she smudged different lines and sections of her sketches.

"Hey, girl." Dwayne came up behind her and shook the railing.

"Hey, chump." Rani tapped his arm with a pencil. "Get too hot for you inside?"

"Needed a breather. That boy is dancing up a storm. Got them women all over him."

Dwayne took a sip of his soda and laughed.

Rani shook her head at him. He was Justus's best friend. Luckily, he and Rani got along. The three of them hung out often. Whether Rani watched them play basketball or they drove her to art galleries and exhibits, a lot of their time was spent together.

Dwayne took another sip of his drink. "Good thing you ain't the jealous type."

"Please," Rani laughed. "Like I've got a claim on the guy."

"Shoot, girl. Don't tell me you and him aren't together yet. I'm gonna throw y'all into a closet until you get it."



She laughed at Dwayne and stared into the crowd, wondering when Justus would come out and find her. The urge to go for a walk came over her and she stuffed her sketchbook into her knapsack and jumped off the railing.

“You okay?” Dwayne asked.

“Hm? Oh. Yeah. I’m fine.” Rani pushed her hair away from her face and chewed on her thumbnail.

“Like hell.” Dwayne wrapped one arm around her and pulled her close to him.

Rani could smell his cologne, as well as the sweat and smoke of the party. “Don’t want to talk about it. Not here,” she said.

“Let’s go for a walk then.”

I want Justus. Why won’t he come out? Go get him. No. No. But—fuck. Rani stared up at Dwayne and squeezed his arm that still held her around the shoulders. “You don’t mind?”

“I wouldn’t have offered.” Dwayne finished his soda and threw the can into a barrel filled with glass bottles and soda cans.

They pushed their way off the deck and down around the pool. A walkway arched over the dunes and down onto the beach. Rani tied her hair into a knot on the top of her head, her elbows knocking Dwayne’s arm. He swatted at her and teased her. Sometimes, Rani felt like her relationship with him and Justus was identical. She treated them both the same way. And they did the same with her. Rani stared at the dark sky and searched the stars for constellations. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Dwayne picking at rocks and chucking them into the water. His sandals squelched in the water and Rani had the urge to get

soaking wet. She dropped her knapsack and ran at him. Caught off guard, they fell into the shallow water. The coldness shocked Rani and made her scream with laughter as she surfaced. As she and Dwayne wrestled, she felt the anxiety lessen, saw the images of Rosaline and George in the bathroom fade. Soon, it was just her and Dwayne wrestling in the water and laughing as the waves crashed over them.

## Justus

Justus and Dwayne walked toward the student parking lot. The afternoon was hot and thick with humidity. No one would've guessed Christmas was a few weeks away. The four o'clock rainshower would probably just make things worse, but he had to hope that the humidity would ease up some. At least a little bit.

"Man, it's hot." Dwayne switched his backpack from one shoulder to the other.

"The shop?" Justus asked. His parents had opened an ice cream shop in the center of town five years earlier.

"I was hoping." Dwayne laughed.

With Dwayne, Justus felt comfortable. He was the only other guy on the team, in the school, who was Justus's height, 6'5. Actually, Dwayne had him beat by an inch. And Dwayne could distract him in one minute and then turn serious and push him to think in another. They'd played ball together since their freshmen year when Dwayne's parents moved down from New York City. Florida had been a shock to Dwayne, but with ball, he eased into things. One of those things just happened to be Justus' life.

"Where's Rani?" Dwayne chucked his backpack in the backseat of the truck before getting into the front.

"She's got the show soon. Finishing up some sculptures and paintings too, I think."

Dwayne nodded, turning up the radio and flipping through the stations. He gave up and settled with a cd instead. Rap music filled the truck.

"She talk to you yet?"

Justus tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and shook his head. The girl said about two words to him as he dropped her off after the party. He'd gone looking for her and found her soaking wet and covered in sand. Dwayne had disappeared. When he called her house on Sunday, George said she wasn't there, was working on her stuff for the show and for her portfolios.

"Doesn't matter. I gotta concentrate on ball."

"What?" Dwayne asked. "Like hell. You got two parts in that head of yours. One is dedicated to ball. No question. But you got that other part that likes to mess with you. Thinking about this thing or that. Rani just happens to be a big part of those things. Don't play with me, man. Wasup?"

"I love her."

"And?"

Justus turned down the music. "She won't let me."

"Won't let you?"

"Yeah."

"What? Like won't let you have sex?"

"No. That isn't what I mean." Fuck. Justus shifted in the seat. How could he explain this without sounding like a dumbass? He never felt weird around Rani. But all of a sudden, he always stumbled around her, even when he was just talking about her and she was nowhere in sight. He'd known the girl for five years and all of a sudden he felt like a dolt around her. Wait. It wasn't all of a sudden. Once he broke up with Maria. When he first kissed Rani—when they realized they were more than friends. That's when stuff started to change. He

shouldn't have been dancing with all those girls at the party. He wanted to be with Rani, but he didn't go find her until she'd already left. *Dwayne knows Rani. He knows me. I need help.* "She wants to stay friends."

"Right." Dwayne laughed. "Friends my ass."

"I'm serious. I try to kiss her and she turns it into a joke. Pulls away and shit. Starts talking about something. She'll never talk about us."

"What? Am I supposed to do something?"

"You're supposed to help me, jackass." Justus parked the truck behind the shop.

"Can I get some ice cream first?" Dwayne jumped out of the truck before Justus could swing at him.

They walked through the back door of the shop, the cool air coating their skin.

"Hi, Mrs. Smith." Dwayne snuck up behind Justus's mother and poked her in the sides.

"Oh—." She turned and laughed. "Hi, guys. How'd school go?"

"Not bad." Justus filled a cup with water and downed its contents. He filled it again and studied the shop. It felt like forever since he helped out in it. Scooping ice cream, mixing in toppings. Little kids coming in were the best. The way their eyes grew wide with decision. He loved bringing Thomas into the shop. Justus would slide behind the counter and put on a show for him. Make him laugh. Would take a quick glance at Rani and would notice the corners of her mouth turning upward. He made them laugh. *Or maybe I just distract them.*

"I should've studied harder for my history test than I did." Dwayne leaned against the counter.

Justus tuned the conversation in and out. His mom loved talking to his friends. In a nonmotherly way. He always got comments about his mom. One that she was hot. But damn, she was his mom. And the other was that she just listened and gave advice. That she was a cool mom. Justus glanced at her in her jeans and T-shirt. At the apron tied around her waist. She looked like one of the girls in school. About most things, he could talk to her. Ball. School. His friends. But with Rani, it got tricky. But he tried. And she tried. Justus smiled as he turned and began to scan the flavors of the day. French vanilla. Amaretto. His eyes stopped there.

“What do you want?” Justus’ mother put her arm around her son’s waist.

“I can get it.” Justus grabbed a wafflecone.

“Well what can I get for you?” She asked Dwayne.

“What’re you getting?” Dwayne asked Justus.

“Amaretto with chocolate chips.”

“Naw.” Dwayne shook his head. “Vanilla with brownies. That’s the way to go.”

“I agree.” Justus’ mother scooped out the French vanilla and squashed the center down. She grabbed a handful of brownie pieces and mixed them into the ice cream. Next, she grabbed a chocolate-rimmed wafflecone and scooped the ice cream into it.

“Thanks.” Dwayne smiled at her as he took his cone.

Justus was still trying to get his ice cream back together into a manageable ball for the cone.

“Haven’t been in here for awhile.” His mother said as she watched him struggle.

“You won’t let me.” Justus teased her.

"Oh, I think some scholarships are a little more important. Anyway, your father and I are doing fine. Just hired a new girl, too. I think she's from your school. A sophomore maybe. Your father interviewed her. I don't remember. She knew you though. What a surprise." His mom wiped her hands on her chocolate smeared apron and smiled. "What're y'all doing this afternoon?" she asked.

"I'm gonna show your son up on the court." Dwayne bit into his wafflecone.

"He's all talk. All talk." Justus said. He knew his mom didn't want to hear about Rani. Even though she acted like it. He knew. Knew she would be all too glad if he just chilled with Dwayne today. Stayed in tonight. But he wasn't going to lie to her. He couldn't. "Gonna play some ball and then I'm gonna pick Rani up from school."

"Justus."

"Mom." He strung out the word just as she had done with his name. "I'll get my school stuff done, I'll be home for dinner, and I'll go to bed on time. I swear." Justus kissed his mother on the cheek. "Thanks for the ice cream."

"Thanks, Mrs. Smith." Dwayne waved his half eaten cone at her as they left the store.

"She's always got to start." Justus shifted the truck into reverse. "Why does she have to be like that?"

"Give it up." Dwayne said. "She's just worried."

"Yeah, well she can lay off."

"Stop it, man. Don't talk about your mom like that."

"Why can't she just get used to the idea that I'm not gonna walk away from her?"

"Cause she's nervous, that's all. Man, Rani doesn't exactly have the best family."

“Don’t go there, Dwayne.”

“Shoot, what you gonna do? Can’t handle the truth? She and Thomas are the only normal ones in the bunch. Shit. If I didn’t know Rani, I’d tell you to leave her in a second. But the girl’s cool. She’s smart. A little too skinny for my kind of girl. But damn. If I didn’t know her, it’d freak me out.”

“Thanks, man. That makes me feel so much better.” Justus turned up the radio. He didn’t want to talk anymore. Didn’t want to think. But that’s all he kept doing. Thinking. And not talking.



### Old Man Diatro

Gus stood behind the screen door and squinted into the afternoon sun. He fell asleep on the couch, woke up to find one of Eleanor's quilts thrown over his legs, the air conditioner blasting, and someone pounding on the door. Before reaching the door, Gus played with the temperature control on the thermostat. After hollering for Eleanor, of course. There would be a note in the kitchen. She went to the grocery. To the nursery. To the beach. Didn't want to wake him.

On the porch, Rani stood with her shoulders straight, her hair pulled into a ponytail. Oranges balanced on an arm and Thomas' hand held in her own. Dori's children. It's all Gus could think of when he stared at them. The defiant angle of Rani's chin. Just like her mother. But so unlike her mother. And Thomas' hair so blond it almost looked white. Damn, he thought. It's about the boy. Here I'm paranoid about parents, and I get a child confronting me. But she wasn't a child. Hadn't been for some time. Gus knew it even then. Even before he really spoke to the girl, before he started to take care of her. It was the way she held herself, the shadow over her face, protection from whomever.

"Can I speak to you, please?" she asked.

"Well, hi, Thomas. And you must be Rani?" Gus tried the friendly routine, but the girl only nodded and took a step backward. "Only if I can go check my trees. Haven't walked through the grove today. Wanna come around back?" Gus held open the door and tried to usher them through.

"We'll meet you back there," Rani pulled Thomas with her.

He watched her turn off the porch and stride around the house, Thomas' legs moving in double-time just to keep up. Shit. He was glad Eleanor wouldn't be home to laugh at him. But she wouldn't be laughing. To shake her head at him then. Ashamed. He saw shame in her eyes today. And he could count the times in the past fifty-five years he saw that look, on one hand. Being scolded by a child. How could he explain to Rani that Thomas asked him to lasso him? That he only started to scream after the lasso was around him. Telling him he'd be good, he promised, just take it off, take it off. Sobbing in an instant. And the other boys got scared too because Thomas was crying. No, not crying. Sobbing and screaming like he was being tortured, murdered. Eleanor ran out of the house, the screen door slamming, took the lasso off Thomas and rocked the boy, hush, hush. And Eleanor led him around the house and showed him the oranges. Taught him how to twist them off. He trotted home then, smiling with an orange in each hand and his chin sticky with sweet juice.

Gus had found Eleanor kneeling in the sandy dirt crying. He kicked at an ant hill, stuffed his hands into his pockets and waited.

"I told you not to lasso the Hewitt boy. Gus, can't you see? The boy is terrified. What goes on in that house? We pretend to be so decent. To have such a nice neighborhood. But we all know that house isn't fit for those children. We know it." Eleanor looked up at him, tears trailing down her face. "Why don't we do anything?"

No yelling. No anger at him. But at herself. Not what he expected. Not what he could handle. Gus knelt next to his wife, collected her in his arms. It was his turn to hush. But Eleanor didn't want to quiet down. She didn't want to breathe, to drink some sweet tea and sit in the shade. Instead, she wanted to march over to the Hewitts', pound on the door

and wait. Wait for George to answer. Or Dori. Or even Rosaline. Guilt. And Gus felt the emotion infect him as well. All because of his lasso. But it wasn't that easy.

Rani stood beneath an orange tree, stroking a green leaf. Thomas had found a stick and squatted on the ground, poking the tip of the stick into an ant hole. Gus had put on a wide-brimmed hat and came up beside them. Waiting.

"Thomas came home with oranges. I asked him if he stole them and he said no. But I don't know how he got them from you. He shouldn't be coming into a stranger's house." She held the oranges out to him.

"What?" Gus asked. "No. Um—he didn't come into the house. Eleanor took him around back to show him the oranges. And she gave him some. Gave some of the other boys some as well. Our grove belongs to the neighborhood. Even if we didn't take them back here, the oranges are free for the taking."

Gus watched her eyes travel down the length of the row, trying to count the trees. She juggled the oranges in her arms, her face tinting a shade of red.

"Used to have fifty, but we're down to forty-two. I'm surprised y'all haven't been back here. Your momma used to come back here all the time."

The girl's head jerked to attention. "My momma?"

"Oh, sure. Used to play with my daughter. And when she got older, she'd come with the other group of kids and help prune the trees and pick too."

"My momma?" She repeated.

Gus smiled and nodded his head. "I didn't mean to get Thomas in trouble. I just expected you'd know. He's a good boy."

“Um—thank you.”

“I told you I didn’t steal them.” Thomas threw down his stick and scratched at his arm.

“I’m sorry,” Rani said.

“I told you.”

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

“Hold on a minute.” Gus went back toward the house and disappeared into his shed.

It’s your chance. For Eleanor. For those kids. Don’t blow it, old man. Gus rifled through pruning sheers and gloves and hats. He finally found a clean burlap sack and walked back to Rani and Thomas.

“Here we go. Hey, Thomas. You going to show Rani what you learned today?”

Thomas’ scowl vanished and he jumped up, eager.

“You gotta twist, Rain. Like this.” Thomas tried to reach an orange, but he was too short.

Rani deposited the oranges into the burlap sack and lifted her brother and watched as he twisted the fruit from the branch.

“They’re dirty now. Just wash them off and they’ll look fine. We don’t use pesticides back here,” Gus twisted oranges and began to fill the sack. “Just good old-fashioned soap and water. That’s how we lost some. But it’s worth it. They taste so sweet. It’s what’s on the inside.” Gus said.

Thomas ran and deposited oranges into the sack. When it was full, Gus pulled twine out of his pocket and tied the loose end together.

"You gonna help your sister carry this home?" He handed the sack to Thomas.

"Yup." The boy nodded, his cowlick bobbing.

"That's what I want to hear." Gus winked at Rani.

Her face blushed again and Gus felt a twinge of guilt, of pain that she felt so awkward.

"When those run out, y'all can always come back for more. Don't be shy." Gus said.

Rani only nodded. Thomas trotted around the house and waved to Gus.

"Thank you," she said.

Gus only nodded and watched her walk toward the front of the house. Wait until he told Eleanor.

He paced the rows without looking at the trees. Instead, his mind raced ahead and behind. Traveling between the past and the future, and wondering how he could fit into the equation. Judge used to come by and help Gus spray the oranges with liquid soap and water. They'd climb ladders and heave the pump upward, yelling around the tree for conversation.

"How are things?" Gus knew to keep it general.

"Well, all right." That was always the Judge's first answer. Then he paused . . . and then he gave the real one. "The doctors want me to put her in a home."

Gus stopped spraying, stopped concentrating on the spots that showed damage. Judge and Beth-Anne had been high school sweethearts. They'd been married for over twenty years. Was it possible to imagine one without the other? He rested the pump on a rung of the ladder and searched his pockets for his handkerchief. The sweat collected underneath the rim of his

hat and Gus wiped at it. It was only eight o'clock, but the sun had already begun to heat the earth, the trees.

"And you said?" Gus asked.

"I can't do it. I know it's the right thing. No, maybe I don't. I want to believe the right thing would be having her with me. I can take care of her. But I've been taking a lot of time off from work. Some of my clients aren't too happy. Do you think it's time?"

Beth-Anne kept getting worse. She'd lean out of the second story window, screaming her head off and hurling things into the yard. Perfume bottles, lamps, books, her panties. One of the neighbors always called Gus. Never Judge at work. *She's at it again. Someone has got to stop her. It's an embarrassment.* And Gus would run down the street, open the gate, and jump onto the porch. He didn't look at the bedroom window, at Beth-Anne's matted hair, her breasts swinging with her momentum. Instead, he ran upstairs and then paused in front of her door.

"Beth-Anne? Hey, sugar, what're you doing in there?"

He could hear her shuffling around. Sometimes she answered him, recognition sliding into her voice. Most often, though, she threw open the door and started swinging at him. Gus knew to take a step back once he called out to her. To hide beside the door and wait, his heart racing from the run over and from the fear. He was always afraid. Even after the weeks turned into months and then years. Fear was thick in his chest. Would he have to wrestle her to the ground or would she be like a child? Let him slide pills into her mouth, make her drink cool water, and put her in the bathtub? It was always a toss-up.

It got to the point where Gus didn't want to leave his house. Eleanor would plead with him to go to the beach, to come down to the bakery and say hello to her customers. But he continued to hesitate, wanting to stop by Judge's house first. See if Dori was home or Judge. That's when Gus used to teach at the high school, and Eleanor was running her bakery down on Main Street. But it was all different now. At least Gus wanted it to be.

"Gus?" Eleanor called out into the grove.

"I'm here," he shouted. Gus glanced at his watch. He'd been wandering the rows for a good twenty minutes without looking at a single tree.

"Did you see my note?" she asked.

"No, babe. Missed it."

"Oh. I went to the organic market. Got some meat and vegetables."

Gus appeared from behind a tree and stood in front of his wife. Even from a distance, he could smell a hint of vanilla mixing in with the warmth of the afternoon. Not hot today, just warm for November, even late November.

"You all right?" Eleanor asked.

"Hm?--Yes. Just. Rani and Thomas came by. She thought he stole the oranges. It was—"

"Did you talk to her?"

"I couldn't really. It was awkward. I'm hoping she'll come back. I gave them a sack. Thomas seemed to enjoy picking the oranges."

“He’s a sweet boy. They’ll come back.” Eleanor moved toward him, reaching for his hand. “I bought some of that strawberry juice you like. Come in for a glass.”

Gus squeezed her hand as they walked toward the house. He glanced over his shoulder at the lines of trees, the branches weighed down with fruit. Their feet crunched under the gravel walkway leading through the yard. The grass was short, dark green, and smelled sweet. Gus studied the different flower beds as he followed Eleanor. She worked hard in the gardens. Often compared them to the one’s in New England she remembered from her childhood. But she always smiled, put together a bouquet and kissed Gus on the cheek, whispering, *I wouldn't want to be anywhere else, love.*



## George

He sat at the kitchen table, shifting his butt on the hard wooden seat of the chair. As he placed his hands on the table, he stared at his fingers, at the sweat stains spreading beneath where his fingers touched the table. *Damn humidity makes everything sticky.* Short, solid fingers. He remembered pulling on them when he was younger. Wanting to make them longer. So he could play the piano or reach across the width of the guitar like Hendrix. Instead, he had stubby fingers.

Dori liked his hands though. Said he had hands like a child's. Small and reaching. She made him keep them clean. So, he carried a file and clippers in his pocket. Always ready to trim and clean, cut and file. Get rid of the foreign dirt, clip away a hang nail. And the lotion was essential. That's what Dori said. Told him his hands needed to be soft. So soft. She taught him how to make an oatmeal paste and leave it on his hands for ten minutes to make them silky soft. He felt strange with his hands lathered in oatmeal, almost ashamed. But he did it for her. Took the guys' teasing.

Down at the Mill, the guys told him soft hands didn't belong to a working man. The guys already eyed him with suspicion because he liked to write. Or maybe it was envy, George thought. Because he got a job that paid a solid salary with benefits. But the guys he went to high school with still held the same jobs they had when they were seventeen. Landscaping, road crew, or worse yet, picking oranges. George and the guys held tight to the past though. To a time where answers came with ease. Some of them even knew one another from grade school. And those from high school knew George when he used to look at Dori with lust before it became love. From not knowing her, to knowing everything. He was too

young for her, they said. Find someone your own age. She already had one baby and had dropped out of school when George was a freshman. He would follow Dori and her group of friends to the ice cream shop, to the beach. And then she finally asked him to join her group for a bonfire on the beach. George didn't care that bonfires were illegal or that her friends were going to be smoking pot. He just wanted to be near her. Even if she didn't really acknowledge him that first night, or even the next. Eventually she turned her eyes on him. Those eyes that changed colors, blue to green, green to yellow. Eyes he fell in love with.

George kept his hands soft so they would slide across Dori's skin. Cup her breasts, stroke her belly. So soft she crooned. And he wouldn't say a word. Just let his hands stroke her body. The way she begged and moaned. Asking him for more. But then Joe got her pregnant with Mariella Rain and Dori stopped going out.

They used to call Dori a dick-tease. And she'd giggle about it while smoking a cigarette or positioning a bong between her legs. But when George finally got to her, she stopped giggling. Instead, she turned those cat eyes on him and stared. Silent except for her eyes. He found himself begging. Dori made him cry like a child. He never cried. Not ever. But when she had his dick in her hands, in her mouth, between her legs, he cried. It wasn't the best sex ever, that's not what made his eyes water and that tight feeling wave through his belly and into his throat. It's because he wanted her. He wanted to become a part of her. The way she held on to him like she'd disappear if she let go.

But she had only teased him. After Marc and Joe, she looked for someone else to pick-up the pieces. And even though it'd been five years, George ran to her with his college degree and stable job. She opened the door and he never left. He didn't try to be a father to

Rani or Rosaline; sure, he'd go running with Mariella the first year she started cross-country. But that all stopped once Rosaline started wearing her skimpy clothes around the house. Then, George just became a presence in the house. He wanted to start his own family with Dori. And she agreed. Played along. Until the pregnancy actually happened. Until the voices started and her mind spun out of control and she stopped talking to him. Stopped asking him about his editorials. She stopped coming home altogether. Leaving him without the slightest glance over her shoulder. Hitchhiking her way back to town at the end of the day. He couldn't do anything except wait. She always came back.

*I love her.*

Or maybe I didn't run to her—she ran to me. Rani's daddy left. Said Dori was crazy. He called the state on her. The first time those men came in to check things out, Dori came crying to me. Holding Mariella like a sack of potatoes. She left Rosaline with her daddy. Just as well. Because Rosaline made that man stay around longer than he should've. Came back from the service and stayed throughout the next pregnancy until he saw Mariella's eyes. Those gray eyes that came from nowhere and that black hair. He left, calling Dori a whore. George would've never thought of calling her a whore. Not then anyway. He loved her. She came crying to him, begging him to help her. To make sure those men didn't take away her girls or her house. Help her stay safe and keep her kids. She came to me. To me, dammit. Of course he helped.

He used to write editorials at the paper his father owned in the next town over. Get up early in the morning and drive over there, write his column, sip gently from his coffee cup, and then leave. Come back home to bed where he would touch Dori and they would both cry

and laugh and cry again. For almost three years he did that, until he came home one time to find the bed empty. He found Rosaline sitting on the couch watching the television. And sprawled out on the floor, Mariella had scraps of paper she was drawing pictures on. She was the one who stared up at him. Those eyes. Those gray eyes staring up at him. He knew where Dori had gone.

He thought a baby would change things. Would keep her home and away from the guys at the bar, away from the guys in the next town over. And it did, until the voices started and she forgot she was pregnant. Just like her mother, they said. The bitterness grew inside of George, devouring his sense of self. Devouring Dori. Until he had nothing left. Nothing but seventeen-year-old Rosaline and a cooing baby with a lop-sided grin.

Dori stayed around the house for bits and pieces. There, but not really. An absent comment directed toward one of Rani's drawings. Hands caressing the soft wood of the table tops, the walls, the wooden floor in the entry way. Her mind floated elsewhere. And she couldn't get Thomas to stop crying. Couldn't unless she put her hands over his mouth. I can get him to quiet down. Look, Dori, he likes it when you sing to him. Why can't you just sing to him? *Twinkle, twinkle, little star. Come on, Dori. Sing to him, baby.* Like you used to do for Mariella. Remember, baby? On the back porch? You'd sit on the step and rock her, sing to her, to me. Dori? But she just walked away. Gave him an absent stare. Not seeing him. The way his forehead drew itself tight, the way his lips whitened around the edges. *Dori? Baby? What about Thomas?* George grabbed his son and went into the backyard. Holding him and rocking him.

He tried to remember what it used to be like. How she used to love him and croon to him just like she did to Mariella when she was a baby. Because she must have loved them at one time. Full of love for all of them. Except Rosaline and Thomas. Hated Rosaline because of her daddy. And hated Thomas because he trapped her. She couldn't love their child. The one child they had together. Not conceived in the back of a car or in an alley or in the bathroom at The Mill. But in their bed, with wedding rings on their fingers. The first time they were both married. None of that mattered now. Nothing. Told him she felt tricked. He lied to her. Just wanted a piece of her. Didn't love him. Couldn't love someone who tricked her. I don't understand, Dori. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I'm not like the others, baby. I love you. But she shook her fists at him, her silver bracelets clacking together. Called him a liar. Told him to fuck himself. The door slammed behind her. Always slammed.

He stayed. Set up a table, stereo, and chair in the garage and spent his time there. Quit writing his editorials. Withdrew from everyone, even his son. Moved through the house at night. Watched Dori sleeping when she came home. Tried to remember. Tried to forget. But hoping maybe she'd come to him again. Just one more time. But that was two years ago. Just recently, the church ladies dragged him out of his stupor, along with the state. Threatening to take Thomas. Instead of editorials, George now traveled up and down the coast for interviews, searching for the story. The only thing that hadn't changed while George had been in hiding was Dori. The voices she heard didn't stop. The doctors suggested several types of medicine. Even when she took them, though, the voices still lingered. Shouting to her when they tried to have dinner, or when Rosaline brought a girlfriend home. The girls grew distant. Mariella took Thomas outside with her. Away from the house, away

from his mother. Away from George. Why didn't he care? *Why did I stop loving my son? I didn't. Fuck, I didn't.*

George pushed back from the table and stared out the kitchen window. He imagined Dori pulling the old pick-up into the yard. She'd hop out of the truck, grab her straw bag and pull her ponytail tight, her arms flexing. She had a tight body, just like Rani's. Bones and angles. Small breasts. Not tall, but long legs. Endless legs. Legs that used to wrap around him. Used to.

He got a glass out of the sink, rinsed it, and poured cold water from the fridge. On the back porch, he let the screen door slam behind him. The wicker furniture sat unused. George sat on the second step from the top. Dori had been gone for three hours. He heard her leave. Had glanced at his watch and then eased himself out of the garage and into the house. Smelling remnants of her—patchouli, crushed flowers, and tangerines. He imagined her hippie skirt floating around her legs, her silver bracelets clinking as she moved around the house. But she was gone.

The grass needed to be cut. George hadn't noticed how tall it had gotten. It was clear up to the porch. Hell, he could get hay out of the damn stuff. He set his glass down and put his head in his hands. This needed to stop. He was beginning to lose his mind. Worse than Dori.

"Well look who came out of hiding." Rosaline stood in front of him, blinking her eyes.

"Well, hey." George said. "You know where Thomas is?"

Rosaline brought her shoulders up toward her ears. Ears loaded with silver hoops and studs. "I just got home myself."

George nodded and stared beyond her. The orange tree needed to be trimmed. The bitter fruit hung rotten and bug-eaten. Branches snarled into every which direction, the new growth darting away from the rest of the tree as if it was trying to reject its connection.

"I don't keep track of him, but I bet he's with Rani." Rosaline said.

Rage. He felt rage at this girl who wasn't his daughter. She looked just like her father, Marc. George remembered watching him and Dori together in front of the high school. The jock who pretended to stay clean, pretended like he didn't use drugs or women. Dori wasn't the only woman Marc had in high school. Probably wasn't the only one he knocked up either.

George wanted to grab Rosaline by the shoulders. To slap her. She should've been out of the house years ago. Instead, she came into the kitchen dressed in her skimpy pajamas, brushing up against him while he tried to wash a few of the dishes.

Rosaline glared at him in silence.

"What?" George asked.

A grin crinkled the corners of Rosaline's mouth. Hate and rage. Where's Dori? Fuck. George wanted to leave. To walk off the porch and out of the yard. Find Mariella and Thomas. But Rosaline stood in front of him. Her mini-skirt sticking to her hips and thighs. Her tank top revealing her large breasts. Breasts different than Dori's.

"Nevermind," George shook his head. Need to get out of here. Don't look at her. Move. But he couldn't.

"She'll come back," Rosaline toed her bare foot at the cracked sidewalk. She took a step toward him.

Get out. Move you fucking moron. Don't do it. Don't. George blinked hard and ground his fingers into his eyes. Tried not to think of Rosaline walking around the kitchen in her see-through nightie. Or rubbing against his back while he was washing the dishes.

Rosaline smiled again and tossed her hair behind her back. Reddish-brown hair gathered around her face, around her shoulders. Wild curly hair. Hair that came from her father. She took another step closer.

George glanced down at her toes. At bright purple nail polish. At the pale foot, the flat arch, the curve of her ankle where a Band-Aid nestled itself. A cut from shaving, he assumed. His razors were always dull. He'd walk by the bathroom only to find her with her leg propped up on the sink, her legs spread and her panties revealed. Silk panties. With flowers. That was if she wore any panties at all.

George shifted, unsure of what to do. But knowing, really, what he needed to do. To leave. He avoided being alone with Rosaline. Because of that look her eyes. Those cat eyes. Eyes that widened into huge circles or narrowed into tiny slits. Move, dammit.



## Thomas

Momma hears voices. I told her I don't hear nothing. That makes her mad. She holds my head between her hands, pressing on my ears. When your ears get pressed to your head, you can hear your heartbeat. That's the only thing I ever hear. Even after she takes her hands off my head, I still don't hear nothing. I just keep coloring in the kitchen or doing whatever it is I'm doing. I'm coloring now and Momma says the voices are screaming. Rani lets me use her old markers. I don't know why they're old. Still color like new to me. But Rani's an artist. I just like to color pictures of the ocean. Rani takes me to the ocean.

The voices are back and Momma's pacing. I don't like it when she paces. Sometimes, she gets mean. Like Rosaline. That's when I wish Rani'd be home. We could go for a walk. I can't leave the yard without Rani. When I get bigger, I'll just walk out the door and keep going. Go for a stroll. That's what Rani calls it. Strolling. I wish I could go stroll.

"Do you hear them Tommy?" Dori bent down in front of Thomas, tapping her hand on his picture of waves and a bright orange sun.

He shook his head and looked down. His arms stuck to the table. Not from the humidity, but from the apple juice he spilt earlier. He tried cleaning it up, but he must have missed a spot. *Don't hurt me, Momma. Don't get mad. Please.*

"Don't tell me you can't hear them." Dori paced the kitchen, chewing on her fingers. She had been chewing on her nails, but they had already begun to bleed, turning tender from her gnawing teeth. "My momma heard them. She told me about them Thomas. And I want you to hear them too."

“But I can’t.” Thomas picked up a marker and drew a stick figure with long black hair—Rani.

“Listen!” Dori insisted.

Thomas scooped up the markers and grabbed his pieces of paper.

“Where are you going?” Dori asked. “Don’t leave, Thomas. Come sit with me.”

“I wanna go outside and draw.” Thomas whispered. “I—”

“Shh—they’re talking. You need to listen. Sit down and listen.” Dori moved toward him, grabbing his shoulders and pushing him toward the ground.

Thomas sat in the doorway of the kitchen, still clutching the markers and his papers. Something dug into his knee. Crumbs or sand or maybe dirt. He wanted to move, but he didn’t want to make any noise. It might make her mad. Don’t make her mad. His eyes followed Dori. She mumbled under her breath, chewed on her fingers, tugged at her hair. Her silver bracelets clinked in the quiet house.

“Momma—”

“Quiet! Dammit, Tommy. You need to listen to them. Don’t—”

Thomas dropped his drawings, pictures of sandcastles, sunsets, and birds scattered across the kitchen floor. Dori stepped on them with her bare feet. Her heel crushed the sandcastle as the paper shuffled across the floor underneath her foot. Stuffing his second and third finger into his mouth, Thomas sucked. With his fingers in his mouth, he could remember not to talk. Keep quiet. And listen. Listen. Don’t cry. Just sit quiet. Be a good boy.

But I have to pee. Thomas squeezed his knees together and held his breath. When would the voices stop? He cocked his head to the side and tried to listen. Really. Nothing.

Not a peep. Not a whisper. Just Momma pacing the kitchen. And I can't understand what she's saying. Sometimes I hear names. Sometimes she's talking about Daddy or Rani or Rosaline. But sometimes she says other names. I don't know those people. She talks about Michael. And about Frank. I don't know who they are. Maybe that's who talks to her. But I can't hear. I wanna pee.

Thomas went to crawl out of the kitchen.

"Shh!" Dori screeched at him. "You aren't trying, Thomas. You aren't trying. Why won't you try for Mommy? Why won't you listen to me? Please listen to me, baby. For me?" Dori squatted in front of him.

He tried to keep his eyes away from her. She always paced in the nude. Buck-naked. She told him he could get naked. That the voices liked them naked. It wasn't the sight of her boobies or the fuzzy hair between her legs that made Thomas squirm, although sometimes it was. Today, it was the blood. The blood on her arms and across her breasts. The slices that she made with the kitchen knife. That's what he didn't want to look at. The red against his mother's pale skin.

Sucking harder on his fingers, Thomas squished his eyes shut. He didn't want to see. Didn't want to listen. He wanted to pee. He wanted to play with Rani. Go to the beach and have her lift him over the waves. Smell the salt water. Feel the sand squishing between his toes. But his mother's hands clutched his shoulders and shook him. Shook him and told him to open his eyes, begged him to listen. Thomas' tongue flicked back and forth over his knuckles as his teeth gripped his fingers. *Stroll. I want to learn how to stroll.*

### George

Once, years before, George lifted Dori's hair off her neck, leaned in and kissed her neck. She giggled and nestled into him. The air was hot, even with the breeze coming off the water.

Judge volunteered to watch Rosaline and Rani, giving George and Dori a chance to go to the beach. Dori loved the water, the way the waves crashed against the sand. She'd been happy for a few weeks now. Yet, George still felt the waiting inside of him. Waiting for something to give, for her to snap and for something to happen. He hated himself for that, for that lack of faith he had in his then girlfriend. But it was there, nagging him like a hangnail he refused to stop playing with.

"Let's go in the water," Dori said.

As she stood, Dori slid her fingers under her bikini bottoms and pulled them down. She turned and grinned at George and then ran for the water. He watched her limbs, her browned skin, taut muscles. The twirling curls of her blonde hair. It was hard to sit and watch her. The impulse to run after her arose as soon as she left the blanket, but George wanted to watch. He wanted to see her body dive into the waves, turn and try to catch another wave back, only to repeat the performance. The tiny string bikini she wore somehow stayed in place. Maybe it was the tight double knots she had made him tie when they still sat in the pickup.

Dori stood waist deep in the water and motioned for George to come in. He stood and brushed the sand from his swimming trunks. The pale yellow bikini turned

see-through in the water and George wanted the beach to be empty. Wanted to tug at the knots he made in Dori's bikini, to hold her naked in the water. Instead, he swam under the water and grabbed at her legs. She hated it when he did that. When he surfaced, she lunged at him, punching his chest. But laughing. George kissed her salty lips and then a wave hit them both. They separated under the rolling water and shifting sand. As he resurfaced, George glanced for Dori and noticed she had gone out a few more feet, the water at chest level.

"Not too far," he shouted.

"Come on, chicken," she said.

"Dori," he said.

The deeper the water got, the greater George's fear. Not being able to see under the surface of the water terrified him, especially when things brushed against his leg, even if it was just seaweed. He loved coming to the ocean for Dori. It made her laugh. She dug her hands into the sand, buried her legs only to break free and run toward the water, coated with sand and a clump of it resting in her bathing suit. The best times were when Dori found some guy whom she shmoozed a surfboard from and then attempted to surf. Really, she did awkward jumps and dives from the board, with or without the presence of waves. George and the owner of the surfboard would stand on the shore laughing at Dori, at her ease.

He would've never guessed she had two babies at home. That neither of their father's existed in her life or theirs. That her mother had killed herself when Dori was young. Too young to know that it wasn't her fault. And in another year, no one would expect Judge to drop dead of a heart attack, the man who ran the 4 mile round-trip to the beach and back

every day. And he definitely wouldn't expect that after ten years of marriage, his wife would be committed, gone from him, both mentally and physically.

George remembered those times at the beach like they happened yesterday. The moments before their marriage, during the dating and phone calls and hidden sex spots. Drive-ins, walking around the historic monuments at night, standing on the deserted beach in the middle of a storm, calling her from work just to tell her he loved her, making love in the dugout of one of the town's baseball fields. But even amid those memories, the scattered moments of Dori's lapses crept into view. The times when she snapped, screaming at him, at anyone. When she stared at the girls and said that she could never be their mother, or when she pulled off her clothes at Judge's dinner party and went running and screaming out of the house and George found her rolling in the dirt and manure of the rose garden. At the beach was the worst one. Not because of the embarrassment. George stopped being embarrassed by Dori, stopped feeling as if he needed to explain the situation to someone else. She's just gone away for a while. She'll come back to me. To me. Love. The beach was the worst episode because the place never felt the same after that. Dori avoided the water after that day.

She'd taken some guy's surfboard and was up to her usual antics. But when she flew off, she came up angry and George was still laughing. She threw the board at the stranger and slapped George in the face.

"Fuck you, asshole," she said.

George stared after her, his jaw open, his hand to his face. The stranger still laughed, picked up his board and left. At the blanket, Dori jerked through their bags.

“Dori?”

“Shut up,” she said.

“What happened?”

“Oh, don’t pretend. This is so stupid. All of this.” She threw the bag down and headed back toward the water but stopped short.

George followed, not sure what she was talking about, afraid to push her. He noticed the woman next to their blanket staring. The urge to tell her to mind her own fucking business crept into his mind, but he decided to focus on Dori. What set her off? Come back, baby. Come back. Dori headed down the beach, stomping through a children’s castle. They’d watch the brother and sister building the castle not even an hour earlier. The two children began to cry as the sand crumbled and the shells broke.

“Oh shut up,” Dori said. “It won’t last anyway. The water will come in and wash it all away. Like it never existed. Like it never even happened. Shut up. You won’t miss it. You just think you will.”

The mother of the children headed toward Dori, but she’d already begun to walk down the beach. George felt his face blush underneath his sunburn. He mumbled an apology before racing after Dori. When he caught up to her, he grabbed her arm.

“What the hell is going on?” he asked.

“Let go of me.” Dori slapped at his arm with her free hand, jerking her body away from him. “Get away from me. I don’t know you. Someone help me.”

George felt people staring, felt the sweat under his arms, on the small of his back, on his upper lip. What was she doing? Why? A group of guys headed toward Dori and George. He let go of Dori's arm and she ran toward them.

"Help me. That guy's following me."

She pointed to George. He stared at her hair, matted around her face. Stared at her dark eyes. He wanted to hate her. To bury himself in the sand. But he couldn't do any of those things. Grabbing her and rocking her, kissing her face, her hair, telling her it would stop, it would go away, was the urge kicking inside of his stomach. The guys stood between him and Dori. Large guys who came to the beach to show-off their bodies. George hesitated.

"Dori? Come on. Come back to the blanket."

"I don't know him. Keep him away," she said.

The two guys blocked Dori from George. His body felt tense, his mind racing. Where'd she go? What happened in the water? How much longer would this happen? It had to stop. Had to. George turned, but glanced over his shoulder and noticed Dori had continued walking down the beach. Near the blankets, he fell to his knees and helped the brother and sister rebuild their castle. Their mother never said a word, but watched from behind her opened book. Three hours later, after he felt like his skin was raw and his tongue swollen, George shook the blanket and headed toward the parking lot. He felt guilty for taking Dori's pickup, but there was no other way for him to get home.

At Dori's, Judge listened to George's explanation. He only shook his head and told George to take a shower upstairs. When he came downstairs, George found Judge outside cutting aloe, the Rosaline playing on the jungle gym and Rani sitting in the grass.



“You’ll need this.” Judge held the aloe up. “Shouldn’t be going naked to the beach.”

Judge slit the aloe and directed George to turn around.

The aloe first felt cool against George’s skin, then tight and then cool again. Judge scratched the aloe with his fingernail, creating more juice.

“She’ll come back,” Judge said. “Beth-Anne always came back.”

George turned to stare at Judge. Was it only going to get worse? Couldn’t he stop it? What about medicine? Doctors? There had to be a way. He wanted to ask Judge a thousand questions. But Judge stared into the backyard, beyond the girls and the palm trees and toward the pines that separated his yard from the neighbor’s.

“Told Diatro I’d help him with the oranges. Mind watching the girls?” Judge handed George the remnants of the aloe plant. “Might want to put more on the rest of you.”

George sat on the back porch and smeared aloe over his body. Rani tottered toward him, holding clumps of grass in each hand and laughing. Meanwhile, Rosaline hung upside down from the jungle gym, her dress hanging down and over her face. The afternoon sun was beginning to set. George wanted to crawl into bed and sleep. All day in the sun drained him of any energy. After a shower, sleep was the next best thing. Instead, he carried Rani in and set the girls in front of the television while he got dinner started. Dori still didn’t appear. Judge came in as George was getting the girls set-up at the table.

“Thanks, George.” Judge washed his hands, squirting soap into his palms and creating suds. “The guest room is ready if you’d like to stay. Might be a long night for you.”

George wanted to protest but nodded as he spooned spaghetti onto Rosaline’s plate and then onto Rani’s. Where had Dori gone? She never vanished before. Sure, she yelled,

snapped and got that faraway look in her eyes, like the things in front of her didn't exist. And she sometimes hit herself, and if something sharp was within reach, she'd cut herself, saying the blood, the pain, made her feel better. But she'd never involved anyone else. Never left George feeling so helpless. That night, he sat on the front porch and waited. He dozed in moments, lifting his head in alarm in case he missed her. At four in the morning, a car rolled to a stop in front of the house and Dori stumbled out. She had a large T-shirt on over her bikini and sand coated her body.

"Hey, Georgey." She tripped across the yard and slumped onto the step below him.

"God. Dori."

He grabbed her in his arms and kissed her face, pushed her hair back and studied her body for cuts or bruises. She smelled of sweat and sour wine.

"What're you doing, babe? I was just out with some friends. It's late. Why're you up?"

"Dori? Don't you remember?"

"Remember what?" she asked.

George stared at her, felt his mind and heart tug him in two different directions. He should've run off the porch and never looked back. Should've listened to the guys at the Mill. But he hadn't. George stayed there that night, walking Dori to the bathroom and giving her a bath. When he had her under the sheets in clean pajamas, he sat at the foot of her bed and watched her. Watched the woman he would marry. The woman who would give birth to his child. The woman who would break his soul.

“Georgey, tell me a story,” Dori would say.

The night after the episode at the beach she slipped into the guest room and snuggled under the covers with him. Her body curled around his and he held her hand to his chest. The book he’d been reading closed and he set it on the night stand. His mind kept racing and he couldn’t calm down enough to sleep. Out the window, the glow of the rising sun began to streak the sky.

“A story, Georgey. Just a little one. Please?” she whispered.

George pulled her arm tighter around his body. Where had she gone yesterday? She would go again and he couldn’t stop her. The lack of memory pushed her into denial and whenever the doctor gave her pills, they ended up down the toilet if they even made it home. More often, Dori would roll down the window, pop the top, and scatter the pills down US1.

“I love you,” George said.

“That’s not a story, silly.”

George turned to face her. Her hair had dried in tight spastic curls perched around her face. As he pushed them back, he studied her face. The angles and slopes, the fine hair on her upper lip. She smelled like tangerines and patchouli.

“I love you, Dori.”

She grinned at him, pulled her hand out of his and placed her hand on the side of his face.

“What happened, baby?” she asked. “Did I make you sad?”

“No. As long as you love me back, I won’t ever be sad.”

“Good,” she said. “Then you won’t ever be sad.” She turned and nestled her backside into his crotch. “Tell me a story, Georgey.”

George thought of these things as he stared at Dori. He’d given her some medication and fell asleep, her hair tossed across the pillow and her hands tucked under her cheek. Inside, George felt hollow, as if he couldn’t breathe, as if he wasn’t alive. Why couldn’t he help her? Why couldn’t the doctors? If she wasn’t roaming, she slept in fitful patterns. He shook his head and closed the door, his hand lingering on the door knob.

## PART THREE

Rani

There are five of us in my family. Everyone perceives things in different angles. I think it just depends on if the scene is important and if that kind of stuff means something to you. Yet, between the five of us, there isn't much difference between our stories. We're forced to agree on many things that took place, both good and bad. It's the reason behind those things that are different. The reasons that drive us to feel more passionate than someone else, that make us remember something a little more than the other. But the experiences and even the different reasons are what draw us together, are what make us a family, no matter how fucked up that definition gets.

## Old Man Diatro

He picked up the cordless phone and then set it back down again. It'd been ten years since he taught English at the high school. Ten years. He didn't wear his ties anymore, or his slacks, or the uncomfortable loafers with thin dress socks. Those things still hung in his closet and sometimes he still had the urge in the earlier morning to dress in these clothes, to drink his glass of orange juice and then scrounge around for the graded papers and his briefcase. Sometimes. Was it bitterness that sometimes kept the feeling nestled? Or was it time itself. Ten years should heal anything. It should, but that didn't mean that it had.

Gus picked up the phone again and dialed the school's number. A secretary he didn't know answered the phone and then put him on hold. He listened to the soft rock playing through the phone and tapped his finger on the tile counter. Olive oil. Garlic. Oranges. An urn full of spoons and utensils. A food processor. A can opener. A few bowls of rising dough covered with dish towels. Gus' eyes traveled down the counter and then snapped to the window that revealed the backyard. The neighbor's gray cat flattened its body to the ground as it tried to slide in unseen by the birds darting around the feeders. The animal's legs gathered underneath it and its tail swished in violent arcs. Gus leaned forward and held his breath.

"This is Mr. Blevins."

"Oh—hi. I'm sorry. This is Gus Diatro. My niece is taking several studio courses with you. Rani Hewitt. I was wondering if she had all the supplies she needed. My sister's been struggling with work lately and I didn't know if Rani had everything she needed."

“Rani? Actually, she could use a ton of stuff. Her talent goes beyond what I have in this class. I’ve been trying to get hold of one of her parents to discuss scholarships for college. She could do running or art, but she’s so talented with her sculpting. I know she sent away to get them, but I don’t think she’s filled them out. I’m so excited to finally hear from someone. Wait. Oh. You have a pen handy?”

“Yes, hold on.”

“There’s a huge art store out on the interstate on your way to Jacksonville. You can pick up everything there. I guess I’ll give you the most important things first.”

Gus set the bags on the family room floor. He never knew how expensive art supplies were. Paints, pastels, pencils, paper, clay, a portfolio case. Maybe he went a little overboard. But Rani needed something. Gus wanted to do something. Give the girl an out, maybe.

“What’re you up to?” Eleanor asked.

She came into the family room wiping her hands on a dish towel. Gus smiled at her.

“I called the school and talked to the art teacher. And this stuff was what she needed for starters. Well, I threw in some other stuff. Couldn’t help it. That store is addictive. Huge aisles. Like a discount warehouse. And it’s all art. Could you imagine what would happen to me if the place was full of half-priced books?”

Eleanor peered into the bags. “Have you figured out how you’re going to get her to take them?”

Gus’ smile vanished and then reappeared. “Um. No. That’s where you come in to play.”

“Really?” Eleanor said.

He put his arms around his wife and hugged her from behind. She patted his arms and squeezed them to her. The buzzer sounded in the kitchen, and Eleanor went to take the bread out of the oven. Sourdough and wheat. She made some extra loaves for the Hewitt’s.

“Any ideas?” Gus followed her into the kitchen and sat on a stool behind the breakfast bar.

“Have her come pick this weekend. Tell her you have a trade-off for her. She could bring Thomas. He’ll convince her. Better yet, I’ll ask her about it when I drop off the bread.”

Gus smiled at his wife. At her look of ease as she moved around the kitchen, cleaning up bowls and measuring utensils. She had been lucky in the sense that she chose to retire. No one asked her to, no one forced her out the door of her own shop. Instead, she hung up her apron, sold the business and came home without looking back. Sure, she sometimes stopped in at the shop just to say hello, but she never got that longing in her face. Not the way Gus did. It was different.

Gus drove the tractor toward the grove, bouncing in a comfortable rhythm on the seat, his forearms resting on the steering wheel. The trailer hit the ruts in the sand and dirt, the chain clanging in the morning air. Only a few of the neighbors had come out so far. It was just the time of day when the cool morning chill starts to fade and the heat starts making you sweat. Gus loved the sweat, the way his body seemed to bake, to cleanse itself.



"Hi Mr. Diatrol!" A small girl shouted from the arms of a tree. Gus nodded at her father who stood at the bottom of the ladder. The Jandris's, a young couple with two children.

The tractor rambled down the row, past other families, headed toward Rani and Thomas. She stood on the bottom rung of the ladder, her head thrown back.

"He's not trying to be an acrobat is he?" Gus shouted over the tractor before he cut the engine.

"Hm? No. He's doing okay today. Except he's trying to drop oranges on my head."

Gus chuckled as he tipped his hat back on his head. "Before y'all leave, be sure to stop off at the house. Eleanor has some stuff for you to take home."

"Is it brownies?" Thomas' voice called through the leaves.

Rani blushed and Gus laughed. "If you stop dropping oranges on your sister, maybe. But I'll ask her before you get anything."

"I won't drop them. I promise."

Sometimes it just didn't seem like he did enough. Giving them food or a place to go was one thing. Gus glanced at Rani, whose attention had returned to the little boy in the tree, and he shook his head. Only seventeen. He wanted to give her an out. Her teacher mentioned scholarships. Would Rani take offense to it? All he could do was try. The branches of the trees shifted in the breeze and Gus moved his way down a row. He kicked at the sandy dirt and smiled. The oranges had been his out. His escape from the school, from the administration. From his own mistakes.

## Thomas

Momma's voices are back. But I'm not scared this time. Cause she said we needed to go outside. Out there, momma doesn't find the knives. She doesn't make herself bleed. Outside, I can get dirty and Rosaline won't yell at me and momma doesn't care as long as I keep quiet and nod my head when she asks if I hear the voices too. As long as we're outside, the voices don't scare me. It's inside. Inside momma scares me. The voices scare me. I get scared I might hear them one time. And I try to hum songs in my head. Songs to cartoons. To Bugs Bunny and to Power Rangers. Hum the songs to myself just in case the voices do start talking. I won't really have to listen. I can nod my head and trick them like I do with momma.

It's the voices that make momma do silly things. Like making ice cream sundaes for breakfast. She says the cherry counts as fruit and that the ice cream is milk, so it isn't really bad. But George takes away my ice cream if he catches us in the kitchen and he gives me cereal or bread or a Pop Tart. Momma does bad things too. She likes to walk around naked. Inside it's okay cause there's nobody to see her and I don't stare. But outside she gets in trouble. The neighbors stare at her or yell at her. Or sometimes they don't do anything except walk by really fast and whisper to the person they're walking with. And the scary things momma does I don't like to talk about.

I don't like the voices. They make momma angry. She yells like Rosaline but then momma gets quiet and the blood comes. The blood isn't scary. Momma wears blood like other Momma's wear clothes. I drew pictures of momma with red legs and arms and my

teacher didn't like it. She took my picture. I thought she was gonna put it on the wall with the other kids drawings, but she didn't. I wanted my picture back, but she wouldn't give it to me. She told me to hush. I hate hushing. I wanted momma back, red legs and all. But Mrs. Lozak said no. Said she needed momma, but I need her more.

Mrs. Lozak made me talk to a man. He let me color. But he told me I needed to color momma and I didn't want to. I wanted to color the dog I saw on my way to school. He had three legs but he still walked. I wanted him to be my dog. I drew him and the man sighed like Rosaline does when Rani's painting. He stared out his window. It was too high for me to see out of. I just saw the blue sky. No clouds. No dog. Dogs don't float in the sky. Mrs. Lozak asked me if I wanted to go back to the man's office. I said no. I like momma even when she wears red. Mrs. Lozak tsked at me. I hate tsking. It's the voices. The voices are scary cause momma yells and hurts my ears and tells me to listen, sugar, listen, even when I just want to color. Outside, I'm safe. The voices don't come outside. In the sunshine, they just whisper.

Thomas grabbed a few of his toy cars, along with paper and crayons. He followed his mother to the shed where she grabbed a shovel, and then he followed her into the front yard. By the walkway, she began to dig. Somewhere, she found George's old running shoes, gray New Balance. She hadn't tied them and there was a huge gap between her foot and the heel of the shoe. Thomas giggled. He used to wear Rosaline's high heels or George's shiny black shoes he wore to work. And now he watched his mother do it too.

Today, Dori didn't wear any clothes. Her veins painted blue angles and shapes across her pale skin and the white shiny lines of scars criss-crossed the blue. Thomas knew the scars paving their way across his mother's body. Across her breast from a knife blade, on her inner thigh from a rusted nail, and from a broken dinner plate on the inside of her inner arm. If someone asked him about the scars, he could point to several of them and recite the incident. Tell them point by point, how Dori screamed at the voices first, how she paced around the house arguing with them, and how she would forget Thomas was in the room, forget to ask him if he heard the voices too. Instead, she'd take whatever sharp object she could find, insert the tip into one point of her skin and drag it to the other. The welt first appeared and then the blood. Dark red against pale white. Thomas knew this. Someone only needed to ask him.

The brightness of the sky made Thomas squint his gray eyes almost shut. Thomas wrinkled his nose at the smell of the sandy, wet dirt and galloped around the yard. Momma had stopped talking. Instead, she worked the shovel into the ground and threw the dirt behind her. Half the time, the shovelful landed on her head, sprinkling grass and sand and dirt. Thomas rested on the porch steps and zoomed his cars along the cracked paint. He giggled. Momma's pale skin turned tan and brown. Gritty. Thomas hated the taste of sand in his mouth. The gritty texture hurts my teeth. Makes me want to spit. I hate it when Rani makes me eat lunch when we go to the beach. I always get sand in my mouth and then I spit part of my mouthful of peanut butter and jelly into the sand and Rani makes a face and covers it up with sand. Rosaline would yell at me if she came to the beach. But not Rani. She just covers it up. Rani doesn't get mad at me.

The crayons scattered across the steps and rolled down from one to the other.

Thomas jumped his cars over the crayons like speedbumps on the steps. He had put the paper under his butt and as he scooted down the steps he grabbed the paper and moved it with him. Momma startled mumbling again. Thomas silenced his zooms and halted his cars on the steps. Instead, he gathered his crayons, searching for the browns and then sprawling out in the tall grass away from his mother and beginning to draw. His mother covered with browns this time, not reds.

“Tommy?” Dori said.

“I’m here, momma.” Thomas swirled his crayon across the page, creating his mother’s mass of blonde hair.

“Come here, sweetie. Help.”

Thomas glanced at his mother and pressed the back of a crayon to his lips. He liked the waxy smoothness. New crayons from the church ladies arrived every month. It took him that long to go through a box. He tried to make the crayons last. But somehow, the paper got peeled off and the crayons would get worn down so he could barely hold on to them and draw his pictures. The church ladies brought him crayons. And paper. White paper for his drawings.

He piled his crayons onto his papers so they wouldn’t blow across the yard. The grass was long, concealing his art as he moved away from his spot. Thomas glanced over his shoulder to make sure the papers weren’t blowing, but he couldn’t even see them in the grass. In the soft spot he found. The spot without any burrs. But the grass was too high to see anything.

“Help me.” Dori knelt in front of him, her breasts level with his face.

Thomas looked down at her shoes, at George’s shoes. If he looked up, he knew he’d see Momma’s boobies. Her large, dark nipples. Thomas didn’t like her naked boobies. But he didn’t mind her legs. Her butt. Or her shoes. He could look at these things. These things that were a part of his mother. Were a part of him. The boobies scared him like the voices did. Like Rosaline’s boobies did. He never drew that part of momma, that spot on her chest. It never felt right. Rani painted that spot, lots of times. Thomas tried, once. He didn’t like it. He scribbled with red across her pale boobies. Making momma red was right.

“Here.” Dori dropped the shovel and got on all fours. “We can dig like puppies.”

Hands dug into the earth. Into the sandy dirt. Hands pulled at the rough grass. Thomas dropped to his knees and began helping his mother. He giggled, a soft giggle, as he tugged at a clump of grass and ended up with dirt in his face and hair. Dori giggled too. She motioned for him to stand up with sandy-dirt hands and when he did, she grabbed his shirt from the bottom and pulled it up over his head. Thomas liked not wearing a shirt. The air was hot with the sun shining in the yard. Thomas liked getting dirty. Getting the sandy dirt on his belly and in his hair. He knew he could take a bath later. A warm bath. And this made him want to get dirtier. Because he liked watching the water change color. Fill with his dirt. Fill with a part of himself.

He knelt in the lawn and pulled at the grass while his mother returned to the shovel. Thomas didn’t know why she wanted the grass pulled. He liked the grass. Even though Rani said it was too rough and lots of it had burrs. Thomas still liked it. The different colors of green, some patches thick and dark and others patches almost yellow and prickly. He needed

lots of different crayons to color the grass he saw in his front yard. But he didn't want to ask momma. Didn't want her to get angry. He guessed the voices told her to do it. The voices.

And then Thomas heard them. Real voices. He froze in the dirt for a moment. Thinking the voices were in his head. That momma had finally given him the voices and he wanted to scream for Rani, to go find her and hide his head in her lap. To run to the bathroom and put his ear against the cold box on the toilet. But he stopped just before he gathered air in his body for the scream. It was the church ladies. It was their voices coming down the sidewalk. Relieved, Thomas jumped to his feet and ran down the path.

"It's the church ladies," He smiled his toothless grin at them. "Hi, church ladies."

## Justus

Justus slowed his truck at the park entrance and showed the woman at the window his membership pass. Reaching across Rani, he popped the glove box, threw the pass in, and tapped the box shut.

“What’re you thinking?” He nudged Rani’s leg as he pulled back to his own side of the truck.

“I’m excited.” Rani laughed as she spoke into the wind. The open window allowed the wind to play with Rani’s hair and voice.

“You said you were here before, right?”

“Yeah. A while ago. I tagged along with Rosaline and some of her friends. They wanted to check out the nudists at the end. Bunch of old naked men. I think they were disappointed. First time I’d seen a man naked.” Rani giggled again. “Have you ever been down to the end?”

“A few times. There’s an old barge out there. You have to walk for like an hour to get to it. It’s deserted. You can see the sand sharks swimming around the barge. It gets deep that fast.” Justus glanced out the window and squinted behind his sunglasses. “My parents took my brother and I out there a few times. It was fun.”

“With your parents?” Rani’s eyes widened and leaned forward in her seat.

“Yeah.” The corners of his mouth curled upward. “My brother and I ran around naked when we were younger. It was cool. My mom was a pretty big hippie. Remember those pictures I showed you?”

“Hmm.” Rani relaxed again. “Will you take me there sometime?”



“To the barge?”

“Yeah.”

“Sure.” His fingers tapped the steering wheel, before turning off the radio. “Can we run around naked?”

Rani raised an eyebrow at him and Justus watched the color rise to her cheeks. Keep it light. Make her laugh. Don’t push it. Friends, remember. He reached over and squeezed her leg, leaving his hand on the seat next to her.

They stared at the landscape through the open windows in windy silence. This was Florida. On either side of the road, estuaries seeped into the horizon. Egrets perched themselves in the water, looking like statues until their heads turned to follow a car or another bird. Other birds, black ones with red heads, like ducks, swam around, dipping forward, their hind-end sticking out of the water. And the blue herons. They should have been called slate herons, but the name didn’t flow off the tongue, didn’t sound as regal. And herons were just that. Standing there with a crown of feathers and a large body, it looked as if they guarded the estuary. The smaller ducks swam away from them, if they landed in the heron’s area at all. Slate heron. No, it wouldn’t work.

“Alligator!” Rani pointed her finger out the window. “Look, Justus!”

“You sound like a tourist,” Justus laughed. But he slowed the truck, pulled over, and parked in one of the handles off the road.

“We can’t stop.” Rani turned to him, blushing. “Only tourists stop.”

“I was just teasing.”

“No. I’m serious. Rosaline never stopped.”

“You mean you’ve never gotten out of the car and checked out the alligators?”

“No.” she hesitated. “We just thought it was too touristy.”

I’m making her feel stupid. He stared at her cheeks, burning red underneath a dark tan. Keep it light, you asshole. “I’ll keep going if you want.” He went to turn the truck back on, but Rani grabbed his arm.

“No. I want to look.” She smiled and pulled a loose strand of hair away from her face. “Thanks.”

Justus watched her jump out of the truck and walk toward the ditch that separated the road from the estuary. On warm days, alligators sunned themselves in the ditch, half of their bodies submerged in the water, and the other half spread across the sun-bleached dirt. He rested his chin in his hand and stared after Rani. The way she could turn timid in a second. Totally change from the independent person she portrayed, to a hesitant child. She never showed that side of herself to anyone else. That timid side. Always acted tough. Like one of the guys. He liked it when she got mad at them, especially when she joined them in a game of pick-up. Mad they played with a handicap or wouldn’t even guard her. Didn’t curse the guys out or start scratching at them. She played clean. And instead of saying a word, she screwed up her forehead and chewed on her bottom lip.

Times like now, he liked watching her the best. When she left her hair down and the wind got hold of it. Not an oil black, but muted like coal. And her gray eyes darted everywhere. Not just staring into you or past you for that matter. But absorbing everything. That’s when he wanted to hold her. To love her the way she needed him to, but the way she wouldn’t let him.

Getting out of the truck, Justus came up behind her. He grabbed her. Rani yelped and laughing, turned to face him.

“Didja think I was a gator?” he grinned.

“I didn’t hear you.” She stared at her reflection in his sunglasses before turning her attention back to the ditch. “That one is huge.”

He followed her finger and noticed a large alligator, its stomach spreading across the dirt like a puddle of ooze. In slow moments, the animal’s eyes would blink. Otherwise, the thing never moved. It could have been stuffed inside a sealed, glass box in a museum somewhere.

Justus laughed. “He’s gross.”

“No he isn’t.” Rani cocked an eyebrow at Justus. “He’s just solid. You have to be solid to be the head honcho around here. Needs to be able to throw his weight around.”

“Throw his weight? He looks dead. Bet he can’t even move.”

“Sure he can.” Rani started looking around in the grass.

She held her hair back with one hand, searching in the grass with the other. Her lips parted slightly. Full lips. Soft pink lips. No makeup. He hated girls who wore makeup.

“What’re you looking for?” Justus watched her. “Be careful not to get too close, Rani.”

“I need a stick.”

“What?”

“I’m not gonna poke him with it.” Rani scrunched her nose at him and turned away giggling.

She didn't find a stick. Instead, she pulled out a long, brittle weed from the bank.

"What're you doing?" Nervous curiosity coated Justus' voice.

"I'm gonna make him move."

"With a weed?"

Rani glared. "Don't mess with me. I know what I'm doing. I'm—" Her joke got lost amidst her giggles.

She waved the weed in the air, broke off a few pieces and attempted to throw them at the alligator. The wind blew them in the opposite direction. Justus could not help but laugh. Like a child. She stood there, her faded jeans resting below her narrow hips and one of his old basketball shirts hanging from her shoulders. Bare feet. The girl hated shoes. Always took them off when she could. He never met anyone but her who could walk across Florida baked blacktop without flinching.

Finding a small stick, Rani moved down the bank, almost level with the alligator, broke the stick into pieces and threw them toward the reptile, being careful not to hit it. Nothing happened. Bits of stick littered the dirt in front of the still animal. Silence, except for the ocean's echo coming from behind the dunes.

"I guess—" she began.

In seconds, the alligator lunged. Rani screamed. Justus grabbed her arm and jerked her out of the ditch. Realizing she had not thrown food, the alligator turned and slid into the water.

"Jesus." Arms hugged Rani from behind.

"He's alive," she chirped.

“Rani!” Justus squeezed her. “He almost ate you.”

“He wasn’t even close.” She turned her head to the side and glanced up at him. He could rest his chin on her head if he wanted.

“Why’d you scream?” he asked.

“I—” she slapped at his hand. “Don’t you worry about that. Come on, I want to see the water.”

Getting back into the truck, Justus followed the road toward the ocean. The park only had one main road, the other roads gated and marked private. The space program owned all of it. And even though he didn’t like the launchers breaking up the horizon, they comforted him because their existence solidified the existence of the park. Without the launchers, the park would turn into a tourist spot and the alligators and the birds would disappear. Just like Daytona.

“Which number do you want to go to?” he asked.

Rani shrugged, pulling loose strands of hair away from her lips. “What’s the difference?”

“Nothing really. The parking lots are just numbered. The surfers go to number four and the nudists go to twelve. Depends.”

“The parking lot with the least amount of cars.”

Justus pulled into a nearly empty parking lot, number seven, and turned off the truck. They walked up the stairs that led the way over the natural dunes. At the top of the stairs, they paused.

“Look.” he whispered.

He watched Rani turn in a circle. Behind the parking lot, they could see the estuaries for miles. The sun glinting off the water and the small islands of trees and sand. No buildings. No cars. Nothing but everything. Turning back toward the water, they saw the curve of the horizon. The blue water swelling in waves and crashing into the sand.

“Beautiful,” she breathed.

“Good.”

They walked down the steps and onto the sand. In the late afternoon, the sand still felt warm against their feet, but not hot.

“Which way?” he asked. Before she had a chance to shrug, he said, “This way.” He grabbed her hand and tugged her left.

## Rani

Rani tossed in her sleep. The humidity clung to her skin as she tried to untangle her legs, her waist, from the sticky sheets. In a haze, she opened one eye and licked her lips. Dry and salty. Sweat on her upper lip. She smelled her own body odor, even though she showered before bed. Fuck. Rani tugged the sheet from around her legs and sighed. Free of covers didn't help. Still too hot. The bugs hummed against the streetlight outside the open window and she could hear the periodic car drive past the house.

She sighed into the room, glad she and Thomas had done mosquito patrol before they went to sleep. It had become a ritual during one summer and Thomas upheld the tradition year round. Too many mosquitoes got through the holes in the screens or through the screen door that flew open with the wind if someone forgot to latch it. Rani and Thomas armed themselves; usually, Rani used a flip-flop and Thomas a towel. At each buzzing, they turned in circles and swatted at the mosquitoes. Tonight, Thomas killed two, one more than Rani. She bragged about his skill and thanked him with tickles and kisses and a piggy-back ride to his bed.

As she tucked him under the covers, she angled the fan on a chair so it would blow on him. His body got lost amidst the stuffed animals piled on his bed. Stuffed bears, and frogs, and puppies she and probably Rosaline tucked under their arms when they were little. Worn stuffed animals. Eyes missing and tattered fur. Loved stuffed animals. When Rani slept with him, they would knock the animals onto the floor and Thomas would curl up against her and fall asleep. She wondered if she had ever been that small. If she had ever felt safe that easily.

“You aren’t too cold, are you, rugrat?”

“Nope.” Thomas giggled. “I got more than you tonight. I was lucky.”

“Lucky?” Rani sat on the edge of his bed. “You have skill, kiddo. Real skill.” Rani spread her hand across his belly and felt it rise and fall.

“Can I go to the beach with you tomorrow?” Thomas asked over a yawn.

Rani nodded. She thought of snuggling next to her brother and sleeping with the hum of the fan breathing over them. But Thomas still wet the bed sometimes and Rani didn’t feel like dealing with that until the morning. A toss up. Chance the pee or suffer through the humidity. She stared out Thomas’ window and noticed the curtains shifting in a slight breeze. If she left the curtains open in her own room, the streetlight shone right onto her bed, but at least she could get a breeze. At that point, she decided on her own bed.

Now, she regretted her choice. Should’ve chanced the pee for the fan. Whatever wind once blew through the window shifted directions. A quick glance at the clock, read 10:30. Only thirty minutes? I thought for sure it was later. At least an hour. Rani went to push herself up when she heard the door click open. Frozen, she held her breath.

His voice entered the shadows of the room, deep and throaty, searching. “Rosaline?”

No response. Rani hoped Rosaline wasn’t in her bed. What if she was? What if those weren’t clothes piled high on the bed? Rosaline never cleaned her side of the room. There were always clothes everywhere—on the bed, on the chair, on the dresser—never in the dresser drawers themselves. The other night when Rosaline wasn’t in her bed, he just closed the door and walked back downstairs. But what if he came in anyway? Images of him putting his body over hers and trying to touch her like he touched Rosaline. Rani’s stomach clenched



in anger and fear. *Don't think about. Think about it and I somehow want it. I'll be as dirty as them. No. Fuck.*

She heard George kick something out of his way, probably Rosaline's sandals. Blankets shifted and their voices whispered. The pounding in Rani's ears began to block any other noise. The bugs, the cars, and the slapping, sucking noises of sweaty skin rubbing together. *Scream, you fucking coward. Tell him to get the fuck off her. Tell him to leave. She said she'd kill me. She whispers that threat in my ear every time he leaves. And that clench of her fingers around my throat. She'll kill me. Should've slept in Thomas' room. Shouldn't have come home. Could've stayed out with Justus. Stayed at the beach. Scream, you chicken. Scream!*

How long could this keep happening? He was their father and Rosaline took that away. Made sure he saw her naked and she wore little skirts and thick makeup. When they were younger, Rosaline always talked about moving away. About going somewhere else where'd she be rich and would have a ton of food to eat and clean sheets all the time. But now that she had George, she wasn't going anywhere. Instead, she spread her things around the bedroom, ruined Rani's artwork with blotches of nailpolish or lipstick. If she wasn't escaping into her art, Rani went running. Thomas had brought it up to his grandfather that Rani went running barefoot. George's father had been supplying her with running shoes ever since. Rani wanted Rosaline to leave. Wanted George to be a father again. She needed this chaos to stop.

Rani didn't hear her own voice, hear the strength of her scream. Instead, she saw the outline of George pushing himself off Rosaline's bed. In the half darkness, he fumbled for his

pants, for innocence, and finally, tripped toward the door. He ran out of their bedroom, leaving the door gaping wide. And then Rani saw in the awkward shaft of light entering the room from the hallway Rosaline's eyes, her naked body, her hair stuck to her forehead with sweat. Hate.

"I—" Rani faltered. She swung herself out of bed.

"You promised," Rosaline shrieked. "You fucking promised."

"Rosaline—" Rani cupped her forehead in the palm of her hand and pushed at her skin. "It's—" She stomped her foot. "Fuck! He's our fucking father."

Rani flipped on the light and charged toward her closet. She found a pair of jean shorts balled up on the floor. She pulled these on and grabbed at her sneakers. At her dresser, she caught Rosaline moving in. Rani tugged a T-shirt from the middle drawer and turned around as Rosaline swung at her.

"You fucking promised!" Rosaline shrieked as she hit Rani in the face. "It was my choice."

Sweat in her mouth. The sharp intake of pain. Of body bruising. Heart pounding. No noise. Just the sight of her naked sister. Her large breasts, her hair, her nails clawing at skin. *My skin. My bruises. My blood.* Move, dammit. Move. Rani charged at her sister. She pushed her onto the bed and punched at her belly. A soft belly so unlike her own bony angles. A woman's body. Her mother's body. Rani swung closed fists toward her sister's pale skin. Finally.

“You’re fucking sick. Why do you keep doing this? It isn’t normal. He’s our father. Please let him be our father. It’s fucking sick. Fuck.” Rani hollered at her sister as Rosaline’s nails scratched her arms, her face, leaving bloody tracks. “It isn’t fucking normal.”

“I’ll kill you. I’ll fucking kill you!” Rosaline shrieked, her naked limbs tangling on the bed in defeat.

“Rani?” Thomas’ voice slid into the room. Both girls turned to find their brother standing in the doorway. He yawned and scratched at his bare belly. “Whaddya doin?” he asked.

His pajama bottoms twisted in sleep and his cowlick perched like a pointing finger on the back of his head. Rani’s chest heaved and she swallowed hard before moving away from Rosaline. Fear, just like that, crept back.

“Come on, Tom.” Rani went to her brother and ushered him out of the bedroom.

“Why’re you bleedin, Rani? Why’s Rosie naked? What happened?” he asked.

“Nothing, Tom. Nothing happened.” Rani bit at her lip as she helped Thomas climb back into his bed. “Just go to sleep. It’s all over. Just go to sleep. I’ll take you to the beach in the morning if you just go to sleep.” Rani felt her hands shake as she pulled the covers around Thomas. Fear. How did it return in just a breath? “I’ll see you in the morning, kiddo. You okay?”

Thomas nodded. “Your eye looks funny. And you got blood on you.” He hugged his blankets to his chest. “Didja make her mad again?”

Rani bit the inside of her bottom lip. "By accident. Don't worry, Tommy." Rani shoved her feet into her canvas sneakers and fumbled with the worn shoe strings. "Love you."

Thomas' forehead was soft and warm as she leaned in and kissed him before bolting out of his room. She tripped down the stairs, slammed open the screen door and jumped off the porch. As she ran, she pulled her shirt over the thin camisole top she had worn to bed and kept moving down the street. Justus. Need to get to Justus' house.

The moon cast an angle of light across the streets as she ran. Past certain houses where she could smell the sweet Confederate jasmine winding its way over fences, around mailboxes, or across fancy lattice work, the white flowers opening up only once the heat of the day passed. Televisions flashed in living room windows. Other houses sat in darkness except for the light on the front porch. What if they were all asleep at his house? No. Hope, Rain.

She slowed down to a trot as she neared his house. As she sucked in ragged breaths of air, Rani walked into his yard and up the dark, porch steps. She tasted blood in her mouth, felt the sweat sliding down her heaving ribs, making her camisole stick to her skin. The shades were drawn on the windows, but the changing colors of flashing light behind them let Rani know the television was on. She peeked through the glass in the front door and noticed Justus' mother, Bekki, curled among the cushions of the couch. It wasn't the news, but some nature channel. Monkeys and safari dressed commentators moved across the screen. Rani's hand hesitated. *Knock. You can't go home. Rosaline. Knock.* She took a breath and her knuckles rapped against the door.

Bekki clicked off the television and came to the door. She wore cut-off sweats and one of her sons' basketball T-shirts. "Yes?" Her voice came warbled through the closed door. She peered through the glass. "Oh, Rani." Bekki opened the door. "Come on in. Justus isn't home yet." She ushered her into the house, but Rani didn't move. With confusion in her voice Bekki offered, "He and his brother are playing pick-up at the park."

Rani could see Bekki trying to search her face. She put her head down.

"Rani?" Bekki reached for Rani's arms and turned her. "What happened to you?" Bekki furrowed her eyebrows

"I—" Rani a lump in her throat and swallowed hard. "I can't go home."

Bekki wrapped her arms around Rani. As Bekki held her, they rocked side to side. "You don't have to. Oh, sweetheart. You don't have to." Bekki said.

*Breathe. Breathe, Rain.* She felt her heart ricocheting in her chest. Bekki's soft T-shirt was warm against her face and Rani tried to breathe again. Rani's own arms moved around the woman and clung to her. *Don't let me go. Don't let me go.*

"Come on. Sit down. I'm gonna get some ice and some stuff to put on those cuts. It'll be okay." Bekki led her to the family room and deposited her on the couch. "I'll be right back." She brushed the hair away from Rani's face and smiled. A sad smile. *Don't pity me. Don't look at me like that. Like the church ladies. Like the state. It's all in my head. Stop it. She's trying to help.*

Rani rested her head against the cushions and bit her lips. In a breath, the pain and fatigue rushed her. Running the five miles to Justus' house, fighting with Rosaline, I actually

fought, I actually fought back. But fear. You felt fear again. Her face feel hot. She wanted to sleep. To crawl into bed and sleep.

“Okay.” Bekki had an ice tray and dishtowel in one hand and in the other, she had a bin of Band-Aids and ointments. “I’m not a nurse, but the boys test my skills.” She giggled as she set the things on the coffee table.

Bekki cracked the tray and put a handful of cubes in the towel and wrapped it tight. “Hold this against your eye. It’ll be cold, but it’ll stop the swelling.”

Rani listened as Bekki hummed to herself and wiped at the claw marks on Rani’s cheek. She could feel where Rosaline’s fingernails left several bloody trails down the left side of her face. The hydrogen peroxide soaked cotton ball dabbed at the cuts. Rani’s eyes flinched, but she didn’t move. *Take care of me. Take care of me. Please.*

Rani whispered, “I’m sorry—”

“Shh,” Bekki cut her off. “I’d be upset with you if you didn’t come by. You can stay in the guest room. It’s all made up.” Bekki smoothed ointment on Rani’s cheek. Cold, yet burning. Fuck. I must look like shit. Rani chewed on her thumbnail. Her mind kept spinning—Rosaline, George, the smell of sweat and cum that always hung in the bedroom when they were going at it. Block it out. Forget it. You’re here. You’re safe. She bit her other thumbnail.

“Come here, sweetheart.” Bekki sat on the couch and pulled Rani to her.

Rani rested her head against Bekki’s chest and clung to her like a child. With her nose pressed into Bekki’s clothes, Rani smelled the laundry detergent and fabric softener. Just like

Justus. That clean smell. That home smell. Rani was so angry. Tired. Sad. I'm so sad.

Rani sunk against Justus' mother and held on to her, thankful for the quiet, for the warmth.

## Justus

As his brother pulled into the driveway, Justus turned the radio down. They played ball longer than they had meant. It was close to 1am. Their mom wouldn't say anything, but they'd see the look in her eyes. The you're-getting-up-early-and-not-getting-enough-sleep look.

"I'm tired," Josh said.

"Cause we whooped up on your ass." Justus knew his brother hated to lose to him. Especially now that Justus had grown four inches taller than Josh. He could block his shots better and dunking became a habit.

"Woah. Come on now. I was at a disadvantage." Josh said.

"Bullshit. Those teams were fair. Totally fair. You just hate losing."

Josh glared at him and gave him a soft punch in the air as they walked into the house. Their mother jumped off the couch when they came into the family room.

"Sorry." His brother said.

"I know it's late—" Justus began. Josh was on holiday break from college, but Justus' break didn't start for another week and a half.

"Did you have fun?" Bekki asked, her voice too fast. "You both look beat."

"Uh, yeah." Justus looked at Josh questioningly.

"We are." His brother nodded. "G'night mom." Josh deposited the basketball and his backpack by the front door and went upstairs. Justus went to follow him.

"Justus?" Bekki called after her youngest son.

"Yeah." Justus turned back to his mother.



"I need to talk you."

"I know I shouldn't—"

"It's not that." Bekki sat on the edge of the couch. "It's something else."

Justus sat in one of the overstuffed chairs across from his mother. He slid down into the cushions and waited.

"It's Rani."

"Rani?" Justus pushed himself up and leaned forward. "What happened? Is she okay?"

"She's upstairs."

"What?" A dry, sour taste filled his mouth.

"She's been asleep for over an hour. Showed up here. Looks like someone beat her. She's all scratched up. Nasty black eye." Bekki sighed. "She was—so quiet. Never cried. Never said a word either."

"Rosaline." Justus spat the word.

"Her sister?" Bekki's eyes widened. "Justus—"

"No one else is ever there. Rosaline yells at her all the time. I've told you that—"

"Hitting and yelling are two different—"

Justus heard his voice rise. He tried to gain control, "It's Rosaline. Trust me." He hung his head. This wasn't the first time he defended Rani. He loosened his grip on the sides of his chair, not having realized that he held on.

"Her sister?" Bekki's incredulous voice whispered.

"Her sister's nuts."

“Justus—”

“Mom, I’m serious. She’ll come outside and start screaming at her. Mouthing off. Right in front of Thomas and me. It’s weird. Rani’ll make me stay with Thomas. She’ll go inside and I can hear Rosaline screaming at her.”

“But would she hit her?”

“She’s always scratched up. Always. Bruises and scratches. She says she’s clumsy. These cuts are different.”

“Jesus.” Bekki murmured.

“What’re we gonna do?” he asked.

“Oh, Justus. I don’t know what we can do. She isn’t eighteen yet. And those ladies from the church already tried to get the courts in there—”

“What?” Justus scooted toward the edge of his chair. “What’re you talking about?”

“They took them away once. Maybe five years ago. Just after Thomas was born. They said the house was unfit and split up the kids into group homes. Someone almost took Thomas, but his daddy got him back. Got all the kids back. Cleaned up the house and got the kids back. I think that place stayed clean for like a week.”

“What?” Justus dropped his head back, his dark throat still coated in sweat.

“Go shower before you get chills.” Bekki gave her son a weak smile. “It’s late. There’s nothing we can do right now. I’m going to bed. Your father and I are taking out the kayaks tomorrow morning. G’night.”

“Night, mom.”

Bekki turned before she went up the stairs. “Justus, don’t start obsessing. You can only do so much.”

Her voice sounded sincere, but Justus sensed her hesitation. Her distrust of the situation. Of the way Rani seemed to occupy his mind more than basketball. He nodded before slumping back into the chair. He went to chew on a hangnail but noticed his hands were coated in dirt from the basketball and from wiping the bottom of his shoes for traction. Instead, he followed his mother upstairs and stopped at the guest room. The oak door and the shiny bronze doorknob felt like a huge obstacle. And yet, Justus wanted to knock down the door and swoop into the room like the hero. But it wouldn’t happen. He wouldn’t do it. And even if he tried, Rani wouldn’t let him. Instead, he opened the door, slipped in and closed it behind him.

“Rain?” he whispered.

“Yeah.” Rani sat on the bed, her back against the wall and her knees drawn to her chest.

“Hey.” Justus sat on the edge of the bed.

The faint smell of vanilla and peach potpourri reached his nose. His mother was fanatical about making the house smell nice. Candles, potpourri, incense. Anything to stop the house smelling like the boys’ sweaty clothes, the grilled fish his father made at least once a week, or the damp ash smell in the fireplace they used all through the winter and on rainy and cool days in the summer. The smells his mother used to fill the house became home. If the bright rooms didn’t smell like Pledge, laundry, or potpourri, they smelled like food. Banana

bread. Chocolate chip cookies. Lasagna. Justus licked his lips and shook his head. Talk to her.

“Thought my mom said you were asleep.”

“Only for a little bit,” she said.

“How you feel?” Justus shifted on the bed.

“I’m sorry for busting in like this. I just didn’t know where else to go. Diatro is asleep by now.” Rani stared toward the window

“It’s all—”

“I don’t have to stay here. I can go home.”

Justus moved closer to her on the bed. “Stop it.” As he reached to touch her foot, she flinched. “Jesus, Rain.”

“Don’t. Sorry. Fuck.”

He heard the sadness in her voice, moistening her words. How could he let her go back? But she would. And it would happen again. The bruises around her wrists a few weeks ago, like thumbprints. She said it was from her and Thomas messing around. And what about the scratches down her forearms, like someone had been grabbing at her? She said it was from the vines and bushes when she went walking in the woods near the beach. Doubt. Questions, seeping into her answers. Into his mind. What else did she keep from him? What did his mom know that she wasn’t saying? Justus glanced at Rani and could see her eyes staring at him. The streetlights gave a shadowy light to the bedroom, so Justus couldn’t see her face. Couldn’t see what had happened. But if she came here, it had to be bad.

“Your sister is nuts.” Justus mumbled, almost not realizing he voiced his thoughts.

“Don’t ever talk about her.” Rani’s voice whispered as she leaned toward him.

“Don’t do it. Justus. I—”

“Sorry. I just—” He swallowed a yawn and sighed. The smell of sweat clung to him and he knew he should get in the shower. “Just stay here tonight. I won’t bug you. No one will. Stay and get some sleep.”

Rani nodded at him. *I want to kiss her, I want to hold her, I want to beat the shit out of Rosaline.* But Rani could. Rani could fight back. She’s strong. So strong for being so small. He used to think he’d hurt her, she was so much smaller than he was. But when they would wrestle, she would fight back, sometimes hurting him. Like she had to prove herself to him, couldn’t let him win. But now he knew why. I always knew why. But it was different now. She could hurt Rosaline if she wanted. But instead, Rani always got hurt. Always had the bruises. *Leave before you do something stupid. Don’t kiss her, you jackass. She doesn’t need that shit from you right now. Shower.*

“Night, Rain.” He walked out of the room and closed the door without looking back at the bed.

Justus stepped out of the shower and dried his body. He pulled on some boxer shorts and threw his stuff in the hamper. As he brushed his teeth, a soft knock sounded on the door, sending his heart pounding until his mom peeked her head in.

“Hey.” He garbled over the toothpaste.

“She staying here?”

Justus nodded and spit into the sink. “I’m pretty sure she is.”

“She seem—”

"She wouldn't really talk to me. Really quiet." Justus brushed some more, spit, and rinsed his mouth.

"Are you okay?"

"What?" He glanced at his mother. "Yeah. It's all right."

"Justus?"

"Mom. I'm—" Justus laughed as he leaned against the bathroom counter. His mom sat on the edge of the bathtub. "It's weird. Cause I've liked this girl for so long. And I need to concentrate on ball to secure those scholarships. But, like, what's gonna happen to her? I don't want to leave her. And—"

"You can't worry about her—"

"But she knows I'm going to leave. She's constantly holding back—I love her— And I can't tell her that. I can't. And I don't know what to do half the time." Justus crossed his arms over his chest. "I know things are so messed up with her. So, I, like, talk to myself half the time when I'm around her. Trying to figure out the balance."

"You have to be yourself."

"But." Justus yawned. "Like tonight. I wanted to tell her all these things. I wanted to kiss her. But—. How do I know—. She's not even a girlfriend." Justus quoted his figures around the questionable word.

"If you're afraid, how's she going to trust you?"

Justus tapped his teeth together.

"Go to sleep." His mother stood. She touched his arm. "Justus."

He hugged his mother. Even though she was a foot shorter than him, she still gave a solid hug. Made his body relax. Like when he was little and he could crawl into her lap.

Justus gave Bekki a little squeeze and pulled away.

“I love you, sweetheart.” His mother smiled up at him before leaving the bathroom.

Justus paused in the hallway. Tempted to go back to the guest room. To be honest with her. To find out what happened. To find out what else she kept from him. Instead, he turned and went into his own room. He imagined staying awake. Going into her room and talking to her. Kissing her. Imagined her coming to his room. He thought he'd stay awake and wait. But the air conditioner clicked on and he pulled the covers over himself and stretched out on his back. His head made an indent in the feather pillow and he sighed, closed his eyes, and fell asleep.

## Thomas

Thomas woke up. Stretched. And rolled onto his back. Sunlight filtered into his room through the open window. If he listened closely, he could hear the sprinklers in the neighbor's lawn. He lifted the covers and smiled to find himself dry. He made it through the night without wetting the bed. But now he knew what woke him up. The pressure on his tummy. Jumping out of bed, he trotted toward the bathroom down the hall. The beach. Rani's taking me to the beach. Thomas ran to his sister's bedroom and opened the door just a peek. Empty bed. Rosaline sprawled out on her own. Empty bed. She left? She left without me? Thomas closed the door and stomped down the stairs. He stood on his tiptoes and unlatched the screen door. He shoved open the door and sat down on the porch steps. Thomas sighed. His eyes squinted in the morning light. She left without me. I wanted to build a sand castle. And she lifts me up. So the waves don't get me. But she gets hit. Rani gets knocked down by the water. She keeps me safe. But she left me. I slept too long. Thomas put his elbows on his knees and his chin into his hands. His sleepy hair was smashed in different directions and his pajama shorts were twisted from when he pulled them up after his bathroom trip. He yawned and tapped his bare toes on the wooden step. The lawn mower across the street made him jump as it started up into the morning air. Justus let me help cut his grass. He cuts the grass sometimes. Some families have those big ones. Where you could sit on it. Justus has one and he let me climb up with him. Sometimes I even got to steer. It'd be fun to cut grass. To get dirty. Rosaline doesn't like me dirty. She's silly. She says I'm silly. But she's silly. I'm hungry.



Going back into the quiet house, Thomas stood alone in the kitchen. Dishes were piled in the sink, on the counter and on the table. The overflowing garbage can smelled. He guessed rotten vegetables, chunky milk, and turkey that got that white slimy stuff on it. Rani told him not to eat it when it got slimy. Thomas scratched at a scab on his forearm, making it bleed. He sucked at the blood as he walked toward the refrigerator. He couldn't remember what day it was, when the church ladies had come last. But he guessed it was somewhere in the middle. In between visits. Still some food, but running low.

No milk. Orange juice. Thomas grabbed the jug and set it on one of the kitchen chairs. Opening the pantry, he found a box of cereal, flavored fruit rings. He put those on the chair too. Now he needed to find a bowl. Thomas opted for one that sat on the table, half filled with sour milk and a spoon, pieces of cereal clinging to the dish. He poured the milk into the sink and rinsed the bowl and the spoon. He poured his cereal, careful not to get any on the floor and then with both hands, he poured the orange juice into the bowl. Putting both the cereal and the juice away, Thomas took the bowl in both hands and moved in baby steps toward the front door. With his backside, he pushed the door open and moved toward the steps. He put the bowl down. Then, he sat on the next step down and leaned over his bowl for a spoonful. The cereal gave a loud crunch. It wasn't stale. He hated it when it got stale. Stale and sour. Words this six year old knew well. Mold, too. Pick the mold off and forge ahead. That's what Rosaline said. Forge ahead. Rosaline also said shit. Said everything was shit. The house was shit. Momma did stupid shit. Or things were just shitty. Thomas let the word roll around his mouth but he never said it. Somehow, he knew that word would make Rosaline smack him. Just like when he told her to go screw. He forgot where he heard that

one. Might have been from Rosaline too. Thomas crunched on his cereal and picked at the paint on the peeling steps.

Justus' truck pulled into the driveway. Rani and Justus got out of the truck and came toward the house.

Thomas jumped. "You came back for me!"

"I never left you, kiddo. I just didn't stay here last night." Rani sat next to him on the step.

"I thought you left. I wanted to build a sand castle and I wanted to swim and you weren't here and I was sad."

"I'm here. I need to get my bathing suit and so do you."

"Want me to get it?" Justus asked.

"Just keep your ears open." Rani squinted up at him, the morning sun starting to show its potential for the day.

Thomas watched Rani go inside as he crunched on his cereal.

"OJ and fruit rings, huh?" Justus sat on the step next to Thomas.

Thomas bobbed his head and smiled over a mouthful. "You coming with us?"

"If it's okay."

"Only if you come into the water. You can lift me higher than Rani. She's short."

He scooted closer to Justus. The smile vanished from his face. A sad, little boy's face. Thomas swallowed his cereal. And in a sugary breath whispered, "Her face hurts. Rosaline hurt her face. I know. Rani said she didn't, but I know. Rani won't tell me she's scared, but she sleeps with me sometimes." Thomas inhaled and glanced at the door. He

cupped his hand around his mouth and attempted to whisper in Justus' ear without getting spit on him. "I wet the bed sometimes. And she doesn't like that. I'm trying to stop."

"Yeah? You'll do it—"

Thomas interrupted, "So you'll hold me up? Cause Rani's short."

"Yeah, she is a little short." Justus whispered and put his finger over his lips. "But she doesn't like to think that. She thinks she's tall. Don't tell her, okay?"

Giggling, Thomas nodded.

"C'mere, Tom." Rani stood behind the screen door. "You need to change into your trunks."

Thomas took one last bite of his cereal, drank up the OJ in the bowl, and walked into the house, careful not to slam the door this time. He handed Rani his bowl, grabbed his shorts, and went into the living room to change. His swimsuit had lizards on it. The church ladies took him and Rani to get swimsuits. Rani picked a neat one too. What'd she call it? Tie-dyed. But Thomas liked the different colors of the lizards on his. Greens and blues and yellows. He snapped his trunks around his waist and ran onto the porch.

"I'm ready!"

"Let's go." Justus grabbed him and threw him over his shoulder.

Laughter from Thomas. "I'm gonna barf."

"Eww. Just make sure you don't get any on me, okay?" Justus swung Thomas upright and carried him in his left arm.

Thomas nodded. Justus opened the passenger door and deposited Thomas. He helped with the seatbelt before closing the door. Rani climbed in the front passenger side and smiled back at Thomas.

"Where do you want to go, Thomas?" Justus turned and stared at the little boy. He was playing with one of the shovels and buckets that Justus had brought for him.

"I dunno," Thomas shrugged. "Where there's waves."

"He's fearless," Justus laughed. "Okay. We'll go find some waves."

Staring out the window, Thomas yawned and grinned. He was going to the beach. I like Justus. He always plays with me. Not like Rosaline's friends. They make fun of me. But Justus takes me to his house. His mom makes cookies and brownies. Still warm. You don't have to put them in the microwave and pretend. That's what Rani showed me how to do. But her cookies are warm from the stove. And it's okay if I get chocolate on my face and there's always milk to go with the treats and Justus lowers the basketball hoop in the backyard and lets me play with him and his brother or Justus plays with me in the pool and Rani watches a lot and draws in one of her books Diatro got her. Thomas grinned some more.

*Rani came back for me. That's what made it special today. Rani didn't leave me.*

## Rosaline

It's over. She ruined it. Didn't even think about me, just went ahead and did it. Opened her fucking mouth and said something. Said it to me. To him. Right out loud. Right when we were doing it. It wasn't my fault. I feel guilty. Dirty. The little whore. He wanted it. (I wanted it). But what happened wasn't planned. Innocent. And it made us feel good. Mama didn't love us. We loved each other enough to make up for it. That's all it was. He isn't my father. Why'd Mariella freak out? Fucking freak out. Dammit. Hurt her. Hurt her for taking it away from me. For taking him away from me. George is sweet. So shy at first. Gentle with his hands. Soft hands. He loved momma. He loves me. He was never a father. Never. Not even for Thomas. I ignore Thomas. He asks questions I can't answer. Rani thinks it's fascinating. Fuck her. Fuck Thomas. She ruined it. It's over.

Rosaline kicked back the covers and scratched her stomach. Need a fix. Just get high and forget about her. Forget about him. I don't need him. Just helping each other out. Like a family. A fucked up family. But a family. More than momma ever did. Thought it was her saintly duty to get me to go to school. Why the hell did I need to graduate? Just gonna go dance. Make more money dancing than I would at a real job. Fuck that. Less hours too. Dance, fuck, and get high. Get the hell out of here. Can't believe she fucking told! Does Thomas know? Does Momma? Momma's gone half the time. Even if she was here, she wouldn't know the difference. It wouldn't matter. Shit.

She rolled over onto her stomach and looked out the window. Late in the morning, and the restlessness began to get hold of her. Gripping her like nervous energy. Her feet rubbed back and forth over one another. Left over right, right over left. Rani's side of the

room glared at her. Empty. She had never come home last night. Probably at Diatro's house. Probably sending the cops over to get me. Fuck them.

Getting up, Rosaline pulled on a tank-top and jean shorts. She pushed open Thomas' door. Empty bed. Empty. Quiet. Downstairs, the same emptiness greeted her. Where the fuck did he go?

"Thomas?" Rosaline hollered. "Where are you Tom?"

She scanned the living room. The front yard. The back. Gone. Empty. Fuck. Fuck. Rosaline chewed on her thumbnail. Where had he gone? Ask George. Rosaline knocked on the garage door and swung it open.

"Hey, George?" The humidity sucked her voice into the dark, crowded garage. "George?"

No answer. Thomas was with George. Maybe. No. George. Where'd he go last night? Did he not stay here? Falling apart. Fucking falling apart. I need a fix. Need to get out of here. Call Sarah. Have her come get me. Get the hell out of here. Fuck.

In the kitchen, Rosaline dialed Sarah's number. No answer. She slammed down the phone and paced. Her body tight, her mind pacing faster than her legs. Teeth clenched together, a thin line of sweat on her forehead, on her upper lip, under her arms. Stop. Stop it! She paused in front of the refrigerator. No food. Why bother opening it. She sat on the floor, crossing her arms around her knees and rocked. Rocked and hummed to herself. To herself.

Car doors slammed outside. Rani's voice and Thomas' giggling. Footsteps on the porch. The door swinging open and shutting softly. Rani holding it with her hand. Rani hated it when the door slammed. Screw her.

"Go on upstairs, Thomas. Get the water going in the tub and I'll be up in a little bit to help you. Okay?" Rani's voice was gentle, sing-song, fucking do-da day, as it reached Rosaline's ears.

Thomas bounding up the stairs. Water turning on, heard through the pipes, heard overhead. Thomas singing to himself in the bathroom. Rani coming into the kitchen. Standing by the sink. Doesn't see me. Doesn't know I'm here. Is she doing the dishes? They went to the beach. She wasn't with the old man. I'm safe. Fucking bitch. Do it now. Fucking hurt her now. She has no idea. No fucking idea.

"Rani?" Thomas' voice called from upstairs.

"I'm coming. Hold your horses."

"I don't have any horses!"

"Hold your toes." Rani laughed to herself as she rinsed a dish and put it in the draining board.

Fuck you. Fuck you. Little miss thing. Little miss perfect. Miss beautiful. Make you ugly. Fucking make you hurt. Make you hurt. Cause you hurt me. You took it away from me and I'll take it away from you. Take it away from you.

Rosaline still sat on the floor, hidden behind the kitchen table. With Rani's back turned, Rosaline could attack. In a fluid motion, she lunged for her sister's back. Rani

screamed as Rosaline pulled her to the floor. Strong. She's strong for such a small thing.

Rani squirmed under Rosaline.

"What the—" Rani breathed.

"You fucking bitch." Rosaline straddled her sister's waist and swung at her. Swung with all her strength. Hitting her in the face, in the mouth. Feeling her knuckles split against Rani's perfect straight teeth. Perfect. Not so perfect.

Rani bucked underneath Rosaline, getting loose. On her hands and knees, trying to crawl away. Rosaline grabbed her leg. Pulled her back. Pounded on her back with fists. With open hands. Bodies slapping against the dirty linoleum. Grunts. Hisses. Held breath. Rani kicked. Her legs so strong. Rosaline knew this. Knew to dodge. To get away from Rani's legs. Rolling away, she let Rani get up. Followed her. Grabbed the back of her shirt, her hair and slammed her face into the refrigerator. The empty refrigerator. Blood. Rani's blood splattered across the off-white door. Splattered. Red. Dripping. Rani screamed. Screamed and cried. Slumped in Rosaline's hands. Pulled her to the floor on top of her. It wasn't enough. Hurt her. Hurt something beautiful. Fucking hurt her she hurt me let her know how much she hurt me how much I can't let go because she ruined it because momma always loved her best and George and Thomas too because they swallowed up all the love before I could get any never included me left me for George for George to give me love or I gave my love to George he doesn't even love me loves momma uses me but I love him love him and she ruined that made it dirty made George run hurt her hurt her.

Rosaline pounded Rani's back with her fists. Pounded her until she stopped whimpering. Until she was still. Quiet. Sobbing, Rosaline slumped against the kitchen



cabinets. She stared at Rani's body, sprawled on her stomach. Arms flailed out to the sides. Blood spreading around her head. Her face covered in blood, bruises, cuts. Her arms scratched. Her clothes stained with blood. Her hair spread out. Beautiful black hair. Fucking bitch. Rosaline pushed herself to her knees and searched through the drawers for scissors. For a knife. She found the butcher knife and crawled over toward Rani. Grabbing fistfuls of hair, she sawed through the thick mass. Hair that had always been long. Always been beautiful. The one thing Rani always prided herself in. Always washed. Always saved up her money to buy shampoo for. Take away your beautifulness. Make you ugly. Just like me.

Rosaline's chest heaved as she sat back on her haunches. Leave. Get the fuck out of here before someone finds you. Finds her. Racing upstairs, she slammed into her bedroom and grabbed clothes at random.

"Rani?" Thomas' voice called from behind the bathroom door. "Is she gone? Is it safe, Rani?"

Rosaline ignored him as she moved around the room. T-shirts. Bras. Skirts. Earrings. Perfume. Shoes. Stuffing things into a bag. Holding things in her arms. She grabbed without thinking and ran. Ran from the room, from the house. From her sister. From herself.

## Thomas

I never got in the bathtub. Rani said she was coming. She never did. The sand is itching my back. Right in the middle. I can't get it. Except when I rubbed my back against the cabinet in the bathroom. There's a handle there. And I can rub my back against it. Right in the middle. I was waiting for Rani. But she didn't come. I heard her scream. No. I heard Rosaline scream. They were being bad again. But I wasn't. I wasn't being bad. I did like Rani said. No I didn't. I didn't take a bath. I turned the water off when they started being bad. Cause I wanted to wait. But I waited till it got quiet. Waited until Rosaline left. That's what Rani said to do. I heard Rosaline scream and I locked the bathroom door. That's what I did. And then I scratched my back against the handle on the cabinet. But they kept screaming. I can fit in the space between the toilet and the cabinet. Really, I can. I sit there when they're bad. With my ear against the square part of the toilet. Wait, the rectangle part of the toilet. Rectangles don't have the same sides like squares. The cold against my ear is nice. I like it. Sometimes if they get real loud, I like to flush the toilet and then when it's filling up I put my ear against it and it blocks out the noise because the toilet gurgles and I like that because it makes me feel safe because it's like running water like the hose outside when Rani lets me run through it or like the spring when Justus took us there. Safe. I wish Justus were here. I'd be safe. Rani would be safe. When's Rosaline leaving?

Thomas squirmed between the toilet and the cabinet. His head rested against the toilet paper roll, almost empty. Two fingers stuck in his mouth—the second and third. He sucked on his fingers when he got scared. Crying didn't work for Thomas. He felt silly. Felt like a baby. His fingers were like a plug, helping him bottle his emotions. Stop him from wanting to

cry. To crawl into bed with Rani. To tuck himself underneath her arm, in her lap, curled into her belly. The warmth of her skin, her breathing, her steadiness. Thomas loved her because she was consistent. She didn't stop including him, even when she and Justus started kissing. Even then, he became a part of things.

It's dirty here. Thomas stared at the hair and dust that had collected in the corner behind the toilet. Pubic hair, long black and brown hair, dust balls. Dirty. Sand, too. From his feet, his legs. He could never brush off too good. He tried. Really. It just didn't seem to come off like it did on Rani.

Quiet. Thomas peeked his head around the cabinet and stared at the now closed door. He had slammed it shut, locked it. Right when he heard Rosaline scream. Now, he could hear Rosaline in her bedroom. He knew it had to be her. Rani would've gotten him. Would've told him it was okay. That he'd be okay. But she didn't. Not yet. But she would. She was coming. Once Rosaline left, Rani would come upstairs. She'd use some of her shampoo to make bubbles for me. Some of her special shampoo that she gets with her own money. She'd make bubbles and give herself a beard and me one too.

He heard more footsteps. Rosaline leaving. The screen door slamming shut. Now, Rani. Now. Rani? Silence. Thomas scooted away from the toilet and sat in the middle of the bathroom floor. His tongue slid between his fingers—consistent. He tasted salt. The ocean was on his skin. Rani? Too quiet.

Unlocking the door, Thomas inhaled and opened it—barely. His eye hovered near the crack.

“Rani?” he whispered.

No response. Thomas squirmed. I have to pee. I need to take a bath. He stared at the near empty tub. The water was too cold now anyway. Jumping up, Thomas shut the door and jerked down his swim trunks and peed in the bathtub. He watched the bright yellow fade with the water. Lemonade. Bananas. The sun. Bending to pull the plug, Thomas froze. I don't want to put my hand in my pee. There was nothing in the bathroom to pull the plug. Fingers pinched his nose as the other hand slid into the water and pee and pulled the plug.

"Yuckee." Thomas turned on the faucet and rinsed his hand. He cracked open the door once again. "Rani?"

Thomas peeked into her bedroom. Empty. He walked down the stairs, his hand trailing along the wall. Quiet. Listen to the sprinklers across the street. There's a dog barking. A car drove by. Silence. Shh. Be quiet class. It's quiet time. He was supposed to read. But he couldn't read the book in front of him. He looked at the pictures instead and made up stories. Sometimes he got too excited. The teacher would turn to him and put her finger over her lips. She wore paint on her nails like Rosaline. Always. Shh. It's quiet time, Thomas.

"Rani?" He called again as he walked down the hall toward the kitchen.

Blink. Close your eyes and open them. Blink. Fingers slid into his mouth and his tongue began to work its way between them. Like a hot dog. Like a burrito. Thomas' eyes traveled from the bright blood on the refrigerator to the broken dishes to Rani on the floor. Still and quiet. Mrs. Lozak would be happy. Rani would get a star for quiet time. Thomas shifted from one foot to the other. Back again. Glass all over the floor. Rani told him not to walk near glass or he would get an ow-ee.

Going to the closet by the front door, Thomas pulled out a broom. A dirty broom. Rani used it on the front porch. It wasn't a house broom. But he couldn't use the vacuum. The church ladies brought it over and it was too nice and Rani said he could only use it when she was helping and she was sleeping on the kitchen floor because she's tired and she's gonna get a star. I want to sit by her. But I don't want an ow-ee. If I clean the glass, I can sit next to her. I can get a star too.

Thomas pushed at the glass with the broom. He smeared blood, but managed to clear a path toward Rani. Once there, he sat down. Crossed his legs and sucked on his fingers. She looks silly. Thomas' eyes stared at Rani's face. Blood dripping out of her nose, puddling on the floor. A bump on her nose. Someone cut her hair. She looks silly with short hair. She has long pretty hair. I get to brush it because I'm gentle. Momma showed me how to brush it so I wouldn't pull. Rani likes to close her eyes while I brush it. She says it makes her feel warm inside. I don't feel warm inside ever. I think she means it makes her happy. That's what I think. Thomas patted Rani's head. Short jagged hair, some spots shorter than the rest. Bloody hair. Salty and sandy hair. Still soft hair.

"Rani?" Thomas mumbled over his fingers. "It's time to take a bath. Quiet time is over."

He poked at her shoulder. She didn't move. She has scratches on her arms. Fingernail scratches. They hurt. I got them once. Rosaline got mad at me. I forgot to knock on the door. But I didn't know she was in there. She was naked with another girl. They yelled at me. Rosaline scratched me. But that was the only time. They hurt. Those kind of scratches. Rani has lots of them. Wake up, silly. Her nose is still bleeding. I've gotten

bloody noses before. In school. Mrs. Lozak sends me to the nurse. He holds paper towels against my nose.

Thomas searched for a paper towel. For a towel period. Nothing. He trotted back up the stairs and grabbed his washcloth out of the bathroom. Running back down, he squatted next to Rani and held the washcloth against her face. Fingers back into his mouth. Thomas blinked and stared. She must be tired. I don't want her to be tired anymore. I want her to play with me. She said we could catch fireflies if I took a bath. I'll take a bath. Wake up.

## Rani

She whimpered as she tried to lift her head. Pain. Stickiness. It felt as if she couldn't breathe. As if she were being suffocated. Rani focused her eyes, squinted. Realized there was something being held against her nose. She attempted to push it away, with her mind, because her body couldn't move. Not yet.

"You awake? You waken up for me? Rani? Stop scaring me. Wake up. Please?"

Thomas' face peered over her own. He was holding a washcloth against her nose. A blood-soaked washcloth.

Rani tried to smile. Smile for Thomas. But it was a wasted effort. She hurt too much. Flashes. Rosaline. Fists. She came out of nowhere. Why didn't I look for her? I always look for her. Need to get up. What if George comes home? Need to get up. Thomas.

"What do I do?" Thomas asked. "Call the hospital? Call Justus? Call Mr. D?"

"No," Rani lifted her head. Pounding in her ears. She winced. "Don't call Justus."

"He called us."

"What?" He can't find me. If he finds me, he'll make us leave. They'll take Thomas. He can't. No.

"I told him you were sleeping," Thomas smiled at her. "That's all I told him. And you were sorta sleeping. Right? So I didn't lie. You told me not to lie. But not to tell the total truth. So I didn't. I did good. Huh, Rani? I did it right."

"Yeah, kiddo," Rani's tongue licked dry and swollen lips. Blood. Metallic taste.

Pushing herself up, Rani breathed deep. She could feel bruises on her back. Feel the scratches on her arms. Fingernail scratches. And her face. How was Thomas not scared? Did it not look that bad? It hurt godawful. Almost enough to make her lay back down. To make her close her eyes and go back to sleep. But she hadn't been asleep. Without the washcloth in her face, Rani could breathe. Yet, when she put her fingers to her nose. She could feel the fresh blood, feel the swollen blob on her face, feel the small bump that had never been there before. The bruises from Rosaline's last attack hadn't yet begun to fade from tight knots into green and yellow swirls across her skin. Now, Rani could feel new bruises spreading across her body in a dull pounding ache. She felt the burning in her throat. The burning choke of tears. From exhaustion. From giving up. Not in front of Thomas. Control yourself. Control. Think. Think.

She glanced out the kitchen window. Still daylight. How long had she been there? A few minutes? An hour? Who could she call? Need to get to the hospital. Standing, she gripped for the counter.

"Rani? Can I help? I can help."

"Yeah. Get the phone, Thomas. Bring me the phone."

Thomas went to hop off the floor, but stopped before he got to the kitchen phone.

"Glass. You said I'd get an ow-ee."

"Get the one on George's desk," she said.

Thomas ran out of the kitchen and came back out of breath. He held the phone to Rani, but the numbers blurred when she stared at them.



"Okay. Press the big button to turn it on. Go ahead. Press these buttons. 268.

3114. Got it?"

"Yup," He looked up and smiled at her. His jack-o-lantern smile.

She took the phone from him and listened. Ringing. Rani leaned her elbows on the counter. Her head pounded. No one was answering. They probably went out to dinner. The old man's voice on the answering machine. Rani handed the phone back to Thomas. I need to sit down. Need to sleep. So tired. Rani went to push her hair out of her face. Hair that wasn't there. Panic. Stripped. Tears in her eyes. On her face. Oh, fuck. Oh, God. No. Oh, fuck. Rani sank to her knees, her hands still gripping the counter.

"Rani?" Thomas next to her. Wrapped his little arms around her waist. "Rani, don't die. Don't die. Please. I was brave. I got out of the tub. And I waited till I heard her leave. Just like you said to do. Just like you said. And I got my washcloth cause you were bleeding. And I was scared. I'm scared. Don't leave me." Thomas began to cry. He pushed his face into her back. Into bruises he didn't know were there.

A sob shook her. Shook him as he clung to her. They can't take him away. If they see me, they'll take him away. I need to be fixed. Someone fix me so I can help Thomas. They can't take him. *Breathe, damn you. Breathe.*

"Thomas. Is George's car here? Go see. It's okay. I'll be okay. Just go see."

He moved away from her. Hesitating, but moving. He peered out the window.

"Yup."

"Go to the garage and get George."

"Rani. I—"

“You have to be brave. You have to. So I can get better. So we can go play.” What else. What will make him do it. “So once you take a bath, I’ll read you a story. And maybe George will let us get some ice cream. Ice cream, Thomas. But you need to get George. You don’t have to go in. I know it’s dark in there. But call to him. He won’t hurt you. He won’t hurt us, Thomas. Please.”

“Will he make you stop bleeding?”

“Yeah,” Rani nodded. Let her hands slide from counter. Rested her forehead against the cool cabinets. I feel woozy. I hate blood. Make it stop. Fucking make it stop.

“Kay.” Thomas marched out of the kitchen and she heard the side door slam. Please. Please let it work.

Footsteps. Large. Rushing past Thomas’ little steps.

“Mariella?” George knelt next to her.

I flinched. Not because he hurt me. But because I hurt him. I made him stop. Made him look at himself. So weak. Don’t hurt me. I’m sorry. Sorry I messed it up. Help me, George. I’m so dizzy.

“Hang on, kiddo. I’ve got you.” George slid his arms around her. Scooped her up like a child. “Come on, Thomas. We’re gonna take a ride.”

“Can we get ice cream?” Thomas asked in a whisper. “She said—”

“Sure,” George nodded.

Rani didn’t want to, but she felt herself rest against him. And he did feel safe. He felt big. Like a man. Like a father. This is what it feels like. This is why. Keep me safe. Don’t let her hurt me. Fix it. Fix me.

## George

What am I going to tell them? How do I explain this one? I just found her? Fuck. Dammit, Rosaline. Damn you. *Damn yourself, you sick bastard.* You slept with her. You let it happen. Only told her no once. Once. As bad as Dori. *Oh sweet Dori. Why? I promised you. I promised you.*

He glanced at Rani in the passenger seat. Her head hung to the side—helpless. Usually, her mane of black hair hung around her face, hiding her ears, her nose, her chin. But now with her hair cut in jagged clumps around her head, her face revealed itself in high cheekbones and a gentle chin. Like her father. Damn. If her father could see her now, what would he think? His beautiful little girl. *Not my daughter.* Did he even know Rani was his daughter? George's eyes slid to the rearview mirror. Thomas. Lop-sided grinning Thomas. Crying Thomas. He doesn't cry anymore. Not really. Only when Rani's involved. Only now. But he's being quiet. Sucking on his second and third finger. He did that when he was a baby. Never his thumb. Second and third. His eyes stared out the window. What was he thinking? When did he find her? What am I gonna tell them?

George pulled into the hospital parking lot and found a spot near the emergency room. Blood had soaked the dishtowel he replaced for the washcloth against Rani's nose. He was afraid to move it away. Afraid the blood would start flowing again. Her left eye was swollen shut, black. God. How could he have let this go on? No. Rosaline wasn't that bad. She must've snapped. Yeah. *Shut the fuck up, you liar.* You know she's taking it all out on Rani. Everything. Pick at the foundation of the family and watch it crumble.

"She gonna be okay?" Thomas whispered around his fingers.

Snapping to attention, George nodded. "Sure, buddy. She'll be okay." He got out of the car, walked around, and opened Rani's door.

"I feel sick, George." Rani slid her legs around to the ground, but her body still slumped against the seat.

So small. How'd Rosaline not kill her? George squatted in front of her. "I'll carry you. It's okay."

He cradled her face in his hands. Her distorted face. Blood. Bruises. Like the guys he saw at the bar after they got tossed around out back. He watched her sigh. Help her, you bastard. *Help her.* George scooped her into his arms once again.

"Thomas, hold on to my pants." George made sure Thomas clung on as he made his way across the parking lot.

The hospital doors slid open and George held his breath as he entered. What am I gonna tell them?

"I need some help, please." George stood at the desk, Rani's body in his arms.

"What seems to be the problem, sir?" The nurse asked as she turned to help him. "Oh my—" Her eyes took in Rani's condition. "How long has she been like this?"

"I don't know." George shook his head. "My son found her. I don't know—"

"Let's put her here." The nurse wheeled around a wheelchair.

"I—" George didn't move. What could he say? Why did the nurse stare at him without interest? Wasn't this a little suspicious? A little fucking unusual?

“Sir? If you just put her there, I can wheel her into a room where the doctor can take a look at her. It looks like she’ll need a few stitches. You can stay here and fill out the necessary paper work.”

“Oh—”

“Go ahead, Daddy.” Thomas patted George’s leg. “Make her better. You said they could make her better.”

George put the semi-conscious body into the wheelchair. Another nurse pushed Rani away, while another one handed George a clipboard. He stared at the form. Asking for her name. His relationship to her. Her age. Her blood type. Any allergies. Fuck. I don’t know. *I don’t fucking know.* He glanced at Thomas. At the green eyes that stared up at his own. Mirror reflection.

“They’re gonna help her, right?” Thomas whispered.

“Yeah, buddy. They’re gonna help her.” George grabbed the clipboard in one hand and took Thomas’ hand in the other.

They sat in overstuffed chairs placed against the wall and waited. George filled out as much as he could on the form. Digging into his brain. Trying to figure out when Mariella was born. When her father left, when he came back. How old was she when Thomas was born? When I took everything out on them? Because I couldn’t keep her. *I couldn’t make her love me.* Not because she was going to cheat on me like she did with the others. I lost her to her self. Why couldn’t I stop it? They told me she might slip, just like her own mother. They told me she was fucking crazy. *Not my baby. Not my Dori-girl. She wasn’t a whore. She*

*wasn't crazy. But I locked her up. I gave consent to put her away. To put her away. Fuck.*

George gave a weak smile in Thomas' direction.

Thomas sat with his legs underneath him. His fingers lodged in his mouth. His cow-lick bobbing as his head turned to watch patients and nurses and other waiting people. My son.

Need to help him. Help Rani. Help myself.

"Mr. Hewitt?" A nurse stood in front of him. "Sir?"

"Yes?"

"I need to ask you a few questions."

"Um—" George looked at Thomas. "Yeah. Okay." George rubbed his jaw and nodded.

"She's lost quite a bit of blood. She won't need a transfusion, but she'll be woozy. Will someone be with her for the rest of the evening? Your wife perhaps?"

"No." George's mind wound itself in circles and knots. "I'll be there." No wife. Hopefully his father got to the house before Dori woke up. His father would make sure Dori was okay. Not a real family. *Look at Thomas, you asshole. Be a father.* Be part of a family. "I can help her."

"Good. Okay." The nurse made some marks on her clipboard. "Also. Well, what happened?"

"I don't know." George's eyes jumped from the clipboard in the nurse's hands to Thomas to the older woman sitting across from him, her own eyes taking in the scenario.

"My son—I don't know."

“She got in a fight.” Thomas popped his fingers out of his mouth and stared at the nurse. He shifted in his chair, kicking his little legs out in front of him and talking all the while. “Daddy was outside. I was supposed to be in the bathtub. She got in a fight. I couldn’t wake her up. But then she woke up. And I got—she told me to get—George—Daddy.” Fingers slipped back into his mouth.

The nurse smiled at Thomas. “Thank you, honey.” She made some more scratches on her chart. “It’ll be just a little while longer.” White shoes turned and walked away.

Safe? Who are you fooling, asshole? You know they’re asking her questions. You know they’re gonna be by the damn house to check things out. Dishes are all over the place. Blood all over the fridge, the floor, the cabinets. And her hair. *What the hell did happen?* Need to go the grocery. Need to clean. They’re gonna come. Fuck. George tapped the back of his head against the wall. He glanced down at Thomas. At his son. Big eyes stared back.

“She’ll be okay. Right?” Thomas whispered. “She said if I got you that she’d be okay.”

“She’ll be okay, buddy.” George stared at Thomas. He still wore his swimming trunks. And he was barefoot. And sand covered his calves and feet. *How did I not notice?* George tapped his head against the wall a few more times. At least he has on a shirt. Thank god he has on a shirt.

## Rani

*It's my hair. He hates it. Shut up. What about your freaking face? No. Don't think about it.* She hadn't talked to Justus about what happened the other night. It felt too surreal. She hadn't talked to anyone about it—not yet. Even when Eleanor took her to the hair salon to get her hair fixed. No words were exchanged about the incident. Instead, they talked about art and running, Eleanor's gardens and the holidays.

Rani tongued her lip—swollen, prickly black stitches—like fat carpenter ants—resting in her mouth. *Don't tie me back together. I want my insides to spill out.* She sat on the floor of Thomas' bedroom waiting for him to sleep. The kid kept tossing and turning, pulling his covers on and off, knocking random stuffed animals off the bed. Her back rested against the side of his bed, her head thrown back. The crickets hummed into the bedroom and back out again, keeping pace with the breeze and the curtains. Her eyes stayed open, staring at the lights of the passing cars, listening to the too-loud radios, the shouting kids walking around the neighborhood, and for the front door. She hadn't been back since Saturday night. No sign of her. Probably with Sarah. Let her be with Sarah. Let her be far away. No. It isn't her fault. Momma's. No. Not even hers. Momma doesn't know. *Momma.*

Dori hadn't left her bedroom for two weeks. And the house moved without her. A few less laughs which left the silence gaping like a scab that kept getting picked. Rani cocked her head to check on Thomas' breathing. He sighed and rolled over again. Fingers gliding over the ridge of her nose, over the bump that would never go away. The swelling went down, but the bump remained. She always hated her profile to begin with, but now it got



even worse. Glaring. An invitation. But no one said anything. Too afraid. Too shocked? Fuck them.

Those men snooping around the house today. George did good. He had the place clean. But I had to be here. My face. They just stared at my face. They couldn't even ask. Not when George was in the room. They wanted to corner me. Alone. Ask me a few questions. No. If I answer their questions, they'll take Thomas. Take him away. No. But I'll be leaving soon. No I won't. Yes. Diatro said so. Even Justus said it was possible. Was he just saying that? I have to believe him. I need to get out of here. What about Thomas?

Rani got to her knees and leaned her elbows on Thomas' bed. His breathing had fallen into a smooth rhythm. No covers, arms over his head. He only slept that way when he knew Rani stayed in the room. Otherwise, he kept his back to the wall and the covers pulled tight, no matter how hot it got outside. Fear.

She pushed herself up and closed the door behind her. The house stood in silence. Rani stopped in front of the door to her mother's bedroom. She wanted to go in, to crawl under the covers with her mother, bury her face into the mass of blonde hair. But Rani hadn't done that for years. If she tried now, Dori might scream, push her away. And then George would have to sedate her, give her even more medicine. Rani rested her forehead on the door for just a moment and then she made her way downstairs.

The kitchen was dark except for the light over the sink. The naked sink, glaring aluminum. Rani couldn't remember the last time it looked so clean. Probably when those men came before. Was it that easy to fool them? Were they fooled? She stared at the array

of Tupperware containers left by the church ladies. Cookies, brownies, cakes, a pie. She lifted the corner of the brownie container and poked around for a large one.

“Get me one too.”

She jumped, felt the sour taste of fear as her belly somersaulted. But it was only George. Sitting in the shadows. Need to be aware. Need to be. That’s how it happened before. It could’ve been Roz. You fucking moron. What an asshole. He didn’t do it on purpose. Fuck.

“She won’t come back.” George shifted in the chair, spread his hands across the table top and stared at them.

Rani got a napkin and put a brownie in front of him. “You want milk?”

“Sure,” he said.

She filled two glasses, leaving the refrigerator door open as she poured the milk. A full refrigerator. Juice. Milk. Lunch meat. Mustard. Carrots. Apples. Real food. She reached for an apple, remembered her mouth, and withdrew her hand. A banana will have to do. Grabbing a banana and her brownie, she sat across from George.

“It went well today,” he said.

Rani nodded. Took a sip of milk and broke off a piece of the brownie. She let the chocolate flavor coat her mouth, her tongue, fill in the gaps between her teeth, and then she finally swallowed.

“They’ll come back.”

“I’m back at the paper. They’re letting me write some articles again. They won’t give me my column back, but they can always use an extra reporter.”

He hates reporting. Used to tell momma he hated being nosy. Getting in people's faces and asking them personal stuff. Exploiting. That's what he said. He didn't like exploiting people. She nodded her head.

"Didja take your medicine?" He took a large swallow of milk.

She heard him gulp and swallow. Only nodded her head. Embarrassed. He isn't my father. But he is.

"George—I—about—" She glanced at the ceiling, through the ceiling.

"I can't put her in a hospital. Not yet. Mrs. B is still willing to sit with her while I work. To watch Thomas when you're at school."

"I know—but—"

"It's different, Mariella. It's all different." George took a bite from his brownie and followed it with a swig of milk. "I promise."

Rani peeled the banana, breathed in the sweet smell, and took a bite. She let it get soft and mushy in her mouth like baby food and then she swallowed.

"But what if—" She began, losing her thoughts. He doesn't know what I'm trying to say. I don't know what I'm trying to say. It was her mother and Thomas too. What if they took Thomas? What if her mother snapped out of her stupor and went ballistic? Rani sighed and shifted in her seat. Pushed her fingers through her hair and tugged on the ends.

"Tell me," he whispered.

Trust him. No. He fucked your sister. Rani's mind drifted to the dark nights in her bedroom. The sound of his breathing. His moaning when he was inside Rosaline. Her stomach clenched with anger. Anger at them. Because they had to pull her into it. Rani

wanted him to be a father, wanted him to hold her like he did Thomas. When Thomas was a baby. *I wanted to be safe and George took that away.*

“I gotta go.” Rani set her cup in the sink and threw away her napkin and banana peel.

As she walked on the sidewalk, she kept her head tilted to the side, an ear aimed toward the house. Imagining she could hear him pushing his chair back and moving into the garage out of habit. Turning on his blues records and sitting in the worn wingback. Staring into space, his fingertips pressed together in front of his face. Quiet. The way he always sat when she crept in there, hiding behind boxes and staring. *He had to have known. He had to.* But ever since Momma started getting bad, George had sat in the living room, without music or the television. He read books and magazines, sitting with one ear aimed toward the stairs. Waiting.

## Justus

He pushed the duvet off and sat up in bed. Rani wouldn't leave his mind and he couldn't sleep. The neon green lights of his alarm clock glowed five am. Rani would be getting up soon to go running before school. Running was her time alone to release everything. But Justus needed to talk to her. She'd been so quiet after Rosaline put her in the hospital.

Justus moved around the bedroom, searching for a sweatshirt and some socks. He grabbed his sneakers and the keys to his truck and slipped out of the house. The morning air felt wet and cool. Justus yawned and stretched. *What the hell am I doing? Need to get it out in the open.* After he tied his shoes, he got into his truck and drove to Rani's.

With one leg on the porch railing, Rani stretched. Justus slid out of his truck and walked across the lawn.

"Hey," he said.

"Wow." Rani shook her head at him. "What're you doing up? You don't have a morning practice do you?"

"Naw. Tomorrow." Justus pulled on the strings to his hooded sweatshirt. "Needed to see you. Knew I wouldn't miss you."

He stared at the way she blushed, the tilt of her head. The angles of her face were sharp, something he'd never really noticed before because of the mass of her hair. She'd used her hair like a shield. Teasing her, he'd call it her security blanket.

He shifted from one foot to the other. "You don't mind?" he asked.

"Not if you can keep up." Rani jumped off the porch. "Ready."

The pace started off slow but Rani soon picked it up. Justus thanked God for all the running he had to do for ball otherwise he wouldn't have been able to keep up. He wanted to talk to her, ask her about everything that happened, ask about them. Instead, the morning was filled with their feet echoing one another against the pavement. At the pier, Rani stopped and put her hands on her head, breathing heavily.

"Good God woman," Justus spit and laughed.

"Haven't run with anyone for a long time," Rani said.

Once, Justus knew that she had run with George. When she was younger, they would run when George got home from work. Justus remembered that. Because if they were at the beach or at his house, she would take off at five o'clock. But they hadn't done that for a few years. Not since Dori's illness began to change things.

"What's up?" Rani asked as she stretched her right quadricep.

"You tell me," Justus said. "Haven't talked to you in awhile."

"Yeah. School. All that future stuff." She looked away, toward the water.

The sun was beginning to rise over the water in bright pinks and oranges. Justus squinted and then stared down at Rani. Her bruises were just beginning to fade and the stitches still marched across her lower lip. He took a breath to calm himself down. In his imagination, he couldn't even begin to create what she must've gone through. He wanted to hurt Rosaline, to hurt George.

"You can talk to me, you know," he said.

"Yeah." Rani jumped up and down. "Ready to go back?"

"That mean no?"

“Not now.” Rani began to run across the parking lot and back toward the road. A few more cars passed them this time, people heading to Jacksonville for work.

“When?” Justus came up beside her.

“Whenever I’m ready.” Rani picked up the pace, eliminating any chance for conversation.

Justus dragged himself through practice. In the locker room, he sprawled out on a bench and felt the sweat dripping off his skin. Dwayne snapped him with a towel.

“Wasup, you lazy ass?”

“Freaking got up too early. Went running with Rani.”

“Woah,” Dwayne pulled off his clothes and headed toward the showers. “She talk to you?”

Justus only laughed as he rolled off the bench. He stripped down and followed Dwayne. Dwayne sang to himself and Justus dove into his own thoughts. How could he tell Dwayne how awkward things had become with Rani? She and Dwayne were tight as ever. Was it jealousy? Was he actually jealous of Rani and Dwayne? Justus laughed at himself as he padded toward his locker and began to get dressed.

“I bet she’s in the studio.” Dwayne stood in front of his locker putting on deodorant.

“I hate going in there.”

“Nice attitude,” Dwayne pulled on his boxers and then his jeans. “Effort man. Gotta make the effort.”

"I feel like bull in a china shop when I go in there. Like I'm gonna ruin a pot or something. Knock over her paintings."

"Grow up, man." Dwayne shook his head. "What you doin' this weekend? Y'all got anything planned?"

"Shit, I haven't talked to her."

"Go to the mother-fucking studio." Dwayne slipped the shoulder strap of his bag over his head. "Call me."

Justus walked down the empty hallway, hesitating in front of the door. It was solid black. He couldn't tell if she'd be alone in there or not. Dwayne's voice echoed in his head. *Come on, you pussy. Go talk to her.* Justus opened the door.

Rani sat hunched over a potter's wheel, her hands and arms covered in red clay.

Mr. Blevins was packing up his bag. "Hey, Justus. You coming to drag her out of here?"

"That bad, huh?" Justus set his bag on an empty desk.

"She's pretty determined to get a few more pieces into her exhibit."

"Yeah. She's pretty stubborn." Justus said.

"I am in the room," Rani hollered.

"Well, I'm going home. Going away for the weekend. I'll lock the door behind me."

Mr. Blevins waved as he closed the door behind.

"Hey, sexy." Justus pulled up a chair beside the potter's wheel.

"How'd practice go?"



"Tired from this morning." He laughed as he watched her work.

Her carpenter's pants were splattered with clay, as was her shirt. She dipped a hand into a bowl full of water and then pressed her hands around the clay. Her bare foot pressed down on the pedal, causing the wheel to spin.

"What's it gonna be?" he asked.

"I think a vase. I can see it in my head, but I haven't been able to get it. Been working on it for awhile too."

Justus stared at the bump in her nose, at the crazy tufts of her hair. Despite the way she looked, she was still beautiful. Something still tugged inside of him when he stared at her. How long had he felt this way toward her? It hurt so bad having her shut him out.

"Sorry," Rani mumbled as her hands slid over the clay. "I know I should've made time to talk to you. This stuff isn't an excuse. I'm—it's just so weird to think about it. To step back and—people keep asking me what happened. How can I tell them the truth?" Rani lifted her foot from the pedal and the wheel slowed to a stop.

"They don't need to know."

"But you do," Rani stared up at him with tired eyes.

He wanted to get angry. The muscles in his neck tightened. But it wouldn't do any good. "Only if you want me to know. I can piece together what happened. That's not what I'm worried about. I keep thinking about you. About your thoughts. Why you suddenly stopped talking to me. You tell me everything. Always have."

Rani picked at the clay on her fingers. "If I think about it—if I try to think about what happened . . . it makes me sick. I want to deny everything. But I look in the mirror and it's so obvious." She wiped her cheek, leaving a red smudge behind.

"Talk to me, Rain," Justus whispered.

"He needs to institutionalize her. She's so fucking gone."

"Roz?"

"My mom. Roz is gone. Don't know where she went. Don't really care right now. As long as she doesn't come back. But my mom. God. Justus, I get so scared she's gonna snap. Like I'm gonna go home and she'll have hurt herself. Or—or Thomas."

"Have you talked to George? To the social worker?"

"I can't," Rani stood and arched her back.

She grabbed at the mound of clay and dumped it into a bucket. Justus watched her clean the wheel and put away her supplies. At the sink, she washed her hands and the different tools she'd been using. Justus leaned against the counter and stared. At the angle of her neck, the muscles in her arms.

"Let me take you out tonight. Just you and me. Somewhere quiet." He noticed the way her back tensed as he asked her. "I won't bring it up again. I promise. Whenever you're ready to talk. Okay?" He stood behind her, putting his hands on her hips. Her skin was bare, her pants hanging low. Justus moved his thumbs up and down the small of her back, keeping his fingers around her hips.

"Okay." Rani turned and stared up at him. "I promise I'll talk to you. Just need time to think. Honest."

“I know.” Justus nodded.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed. Justus felt his stomach leap  
“Jump up,” he said. Rani jumped into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist. Justus  
squeezed her. “Love you, punky.”

## George

He sat in the garage, in the worn wingback, holding the guitar in his lap. Really, he wanted to wrap his hand around a cool glass, a black Russian. But alcohol poisoned his insides, his mind. He hadn't been down to the Mill in a few years. Instead, he sometimes met the guys when they went fishing out on the pier. No. George didn't even do that anymore. Instead, he sat hidden in the dark confines of the garage when Mrs. B came over and he didn't need to be at work. Burning Dori's old incense and holding the guitar in his lap. On occasion, one hand would strum the strings, maybe the other would press a few of the strings down on the neck as his other hand plucked at a random string over the guitar's body. Really, though, he didn't know how to play the guitar. It had been one of those things he found in the garage when he made it his home. When he stopped going into the house and started living in the dark crowded garage.

Houses in Florida don't have basements. Those that have attics are usually only big enough for crawl space. Because of that, garages often get turned into storage areas. At least one side of the garage anyway. George chose the right side. The left side was already taken. Tables, dressers, boxes, clothing racks, floor lamps and old rusted bicycles littered one side of the garage. These things didn't belong to George. The guitar didn't even belong to him. All the things out here belonged to Judge. To Dori. But Dori didn't come out here. She never had. Especially not now. No one came out here. This place belonged to George. The right side of the garage.

Fingers rambled over out of tune strings, creating sharp sounds and contrasting pitches. George had songs going through his head. Blues mostly. B.B. King. But other

songs too. Songs he couldn't place. He didn't know if he made these songs up exactly. Instead, he morphed together different songs he knew, creating a new song. Something different for his mind to wrap around and swallow.

But his mind didn't do much swallowing. *Stay numb. Just stay numb.* It kept getting harder. Especially when the days got warmer and he could hear Thomas and Rani and Justus playing in the yard. Hide and go seek. Thomas' voice counting to ten and then skipping over numbers as he reached twenty. Or they played tag. Mostly cartoon tag. Scooby Doo. Power Rangers. Bugs Bunny. The painful times, the times that dug into George's gut, made him want to scream, to sob, to curl up like a baby, were when he could hear them sitting down talking. Probably in the grass or on the porch. He couldn't make out the words, but the rhythms of their voices seeped between the thin boards of the garage, came around the old furniture, the dusty boxes, settled into the room with him, picking at his skin gently. Justus' voice deep, constant. Rani's voice hovering around different spectrums, but mostly soft, like a hum. And Thomas' syllables rushing and tripping over one another, awkward, child-like.

Sometimes, George wanted to open the garage door and let the sun shine into his personal cave. He couldn't, though. Instead, he waited until it got dark and then crept out the back entrance, through the backyard, and into the house. It used to be that he would glide up the stairs and go into Dori's bedroom when she wandered outside. Before she got too sick. He would lay on her bedspread, breathing deep. Patchouli. Crushed flowers. Tangerine shampoo. Dori-girl. As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, George's eyes would pan the room. A tall dresser with photos on top of it. Thomas as a baby. Rani too. And then the five of them when Thomas was first born. But George didn't like looking at that one. At the

way Dori's face looked vacant. Empty. His father had taken the picture out in the backyard. Herded them together. Rani fidgeted, but giggled when George lowered Thomas so she could peer into the bundled blanket and find her brother. Rosaline stood hostile. Always hostile. But what bothered George the most about the picture was his own face. Pure happiness. His son had just been born. His son. He had a wife and a family. So naïve. Sure, George knew there were problems, but it took him a few months to truly understand the depths of them. To understand that Rosaline was after him, that Dori was after her other selves and that Rani and Thomas were drifting to other homes, to other places for safety. *You're nothing but a coward. You did nothing. Asshole.*

When he snuck into Dori's room, he'd snuggle his head into her pillows, stare at the ceiling, and think. Where'd she go? Who was she with? In her delusions, she always talked about other men. George didn't know where Rani's daddy was. But he knew Rosaline's Daddy lived in Orlando. Under two hours away. She could make it out there too. Hitchhiking or asking someone at the Mill. Damn them. Damn her.

Sometimes, he closed his eyes, not wanting to look at her things. At the paper-thin curtains that never had blocked out any light, making him squint in the morning and snuggle under the thickness of her blonde hair spread across the pillows. Or at the books lined up around the edges of the room—*As I Lay Dying*, *Riverside Shakespeare*—books she read in high school, in her first two years of college. The years before Judge died. When her mind was kept in check with meds and she was taken care of. When Judge welcomed George into the house, an apron tied around his solid waist and the smell of garlic and onions and spaghetti sauce filling the front entry way. That time was gone. She was gone.

George readjusted the guitar on his right leg and shook his head. His mouth had turned sour, almost sweat-like. *You're a sick fuck. Sick just like her. Stop it. Fucking stop. You slept with her daughter. Her god-damn daughter.* His hand jarred the strings, leaving an echo of terrible sounds in the garage. George leaned the guitar against the chair and began to pace. Or rather, he began to weave around the dusty coffee table, the sideboard that held his record player and stacks of blues records, and the wingback. Crisscrossing, recrossing, recircling. Why did he touch her? How'd he let himself fall into the trap? Why wasn't he an adult? *Why? Fucking coward. It took Rani. A seventeen year old girl to set you straight. To wake you up. That's it. Wake up. Wake up. Come on. Get out of here. God.* George weaved his way around the objects until he burst out of the backdoor and into the night air.

Outside, the hum of crickets and the ticking of sprinklers from a neighbor's yard greeted him. George felt his chest heave as he took in gulps of air, felt the sweat on his back begin to cool. He wiped at his eyes, as if trying to wipe away the memories he had recreated. How could he turn his mind off? How could he take it all back and start over? His son was six years old. The last time he really held him was on his fifth birthday. George felt his stomach tighten and he leaned forward, ready for the bile to fill his mouth, to burn his throat. But it never came and instead, he walked to the back porch and sat on the bottom step.

Something shuffled in the far corner of the porch and George squinted in the darkness. The neighbors' lights gave a faint glow to the backyard, but nothing strong enough to create clarity out of the distant shadows.

"Rosaline?" His stomach lurched. Did she come back? Please don't let her come back. Coward.

“Rani.” The girl moved closer to him and froze. “I was just gonna go inside. Mrs. B left. Said Momma was asleep.”

“Stay.” George patted at the step and turned back toward the backyard. He stared at the overgrown grass, at the orange tree left to rot. When Judge was alive, George remembered going into the backyard and picking a few oranges to have with breakfast. To have with Judge’s famous pancakes. Thick, fluffy stacks. Syrup was an option, not a necessity. George could put those things away. Even Dori ate a few. And she would tease him at how many he ate—six, seven, one time even eight. *Don’t you be getting a belly on me, Georgey. I love you just the way you are. Daddy, you’re gonna give him a belly. Ruin that beautiful physique.* The way she rolled words off her tongue. Dori wasn’t stupid, just crazy. *Just fucking crazy.*

Rani shifted behind him. Finally, she came and sat on the top step. George turned to look up at her. Really, though, he stared at her feet. Bare feet. Long thin feet, a high arch, almost finger-like toes. Yet, they weren’t ugly feet, just delicate, like a bird’s skeleton.

“You hungry?” he asked.

She didn’t say anything; instead, she wrapped her arms around her legs, indirectly bringing her face closer to his. In this position, she seemed like a child, small and vulnerable. Even then, George knew she was the strongest out of all of them. And she was on her way to making Thomas follow in her footsteps.

“There’s gotta be something in the kitchen. Right?” George stood up and patted his belly. Even though he rarely ate, his stomach had grown. He’d always been lean, but now he had a bit of pudge around the edges. From sitting in the garage and doing nothing. He used



to play with Thomas. Used to take care of the yard. Would walk down to the pier to see his buddies. But now he walked to the garage, inside of the garage, and around the house at night. *Loser.*

"Come on." He walked past Rani and heard her get up to follow him inside.

He flipped on the kitchen light and swallowed hard at the scene. Dishes were piled everywhere. Bowls, silverware, cups, and pots. Everything was crusted with milk, cereal, pasta sauce. It'd been over a week since the state had come and the church ladies had filled the fridge.

"Damn." George whispered. He turned to look at Rani. The bruises had started to fade on her face, but the ridge in her nose remained. Rosaline scarred across her face.

"I had to stay late at school. I didn't have time to clean. I'll do it now."

"No. Hey." He could sense nervousness in her voice. "I can help. I'll wash, you dry."

George opened and closed drawers, looking for a drying towel. He finally found one shoved into the back of a drawer. The idea of eating vanished as he began to tackle the dishes. *How embarrassing.* As George filled the sponge with soap, he thought of Dori, of Judge. Of the cleanness that spread across the house. The smell of soap and aftershave and always of tangerines. George thought those scents still lingered, but he began to realize they only existed in his head, in his memory. They weren't real.

The bottom of the sink gleamed underneath the kitchen light. Closer to the bottom, George turned on the garbage disposal. Next to him, Rani jumped and took a step back. He turned the switch off and stared down at her. The slope of her neck meeting the swirls of hair

at the base of her head. The pixie cut actually looked good on her and yet, it exposed her thinness. Her frame nothing but bone with clothes attached. And somehow George knew this was his fault.

“You okay?” he asked. She nodded her head but didn’t make a sound. “You sure?”

Rani looked toward the window and then lifted her head and stared at him with cold slate gray eyes. “I’m fine.”

George only nodded. He wiped the counter and began stacking clean dishes on top of it. The water turned off, the sponge squeezed dry, and George looked at his hands. At the puckered skin of his fingertips. Lotion. It was in the cabinet above the sink, where it always had been. George squirted a large blob onto his palm and rubbed the lotion into his hands, into his skin. Rani still dried the dishes, placing them into cupboards.

“I’m hungry,” George almost said to himself. He opened the refrigerator and stared. Condiments. Mustard. Mayonnaise, which George always hated. Butter. Strawberry jam because Thomas was the only six year old who hated grape jelly. Soy sauce. Steak sauce. When was the last time I had steak? There was a leftover casserole covered in mold that George dumped into the garbage. “Fuck,” he said to himself. Rani’s condition was definitely his fault.

Next, he moved to the cabinets. Again, he was faced with the most basic of supplies. Flour, sugar, baking soda. No pasta. No sauce. No cereal.

“The church ladies didn’t come this week. I told them not to.” Rani set down the towel. “I guess I should’ve let them, huh?”

His face burned. Outsiders coming into his home, feeding his children. Wait. His children. No. He said it. Couldn't take it back now. George stared at Rani again. Stared at his daughter. Again, he felt his face burn, felt the sweat beginning to form underneath his arms. What the hell could they eat? When was the last time he went to the grocery? Did he have any money to go? Still hadn't gotten a paycheck from the paper. He hated using Dori's money. Hated going into her account. Hating using his father's money even more. George eyed Rani, at her too-slender body. He knew she was staring at him out of the corner of her eye, even though he really couldn't tell. He felt it. Felt her distrust. Felt her hunger. He thought of Dori. Wondered if she was okay. *Please, God, let her be okay.* He thought of Judge.

"Pancakes." He pulled down the flour and sugar. "We'll have pancakes."

## Rani

The colors wouldn't blend together. She dabbed the brush again into the black and white and tried to mix them into the deep gray she imagined the side of the castle to be. Again, the paint smeared into too light of a color. Rani threw the palette onto a desk and sat on a stool. The half finished painting loomed in front of her on a 3'x5' canvas. Closing her eyes made the painting reappear in her mind in the colors she couldn't create. "Personal Fairytales" was the title of the piece. She knew a lot about those. Creating them in her mind. Dori reading to Thomas and baking cookies like Bekki. Her own father a part of her life. What did he even look like? And Rosaline wouldn't snap between two emotions, but would remain stable, would be the one who braided her hair, who crawled into her bed to whisper about what she wanted to do in the future. Advertising. Suits. A fancy briefcase. Even though Rani created scenarios, she knew things could be worse.

The smell of Rosaline's curly hair came to Rani as she thought about the way Rosaline used to crawl into her bed. Not really crying, but crying. *I'm scared. Please.* Rani would scoot over, sliding across the worn cotton sheets, like she always did. The cold mattress shocked her bare legs and arms and she moved closer to Rosaline's back. She felt the most fear toward her sister when she crawled into her bed. When she spread her curly hair across Rani's pillow and pressed her rounded back against Rani. Yet, she craved that moment because they used to cuddle when they were little, but Rosaline had grown out of it. Had told Rani to get into her own bed. Before Rosaline left, before she slept with George, she had recreated their childhood ritual. Rani feared Rosaline would snap, would roll over and grip

Rani's throat, pull her hair. She only did it once. For a minute. But then she started crying and telling Rani she was sorry, asking for forgiveness. And Rani could only nod her head. Thinking, *Don't kill me. Please don't kill me. Let it be a dream.* But when she woke up in the morning and looked in the mirror, she had bruises on the sides of her neck. *A dream.*

Rani opened one eye and judged the painting this way. The colors weren't right. She wanted a mystical, cloud-like appearance to cause the castle to appear like magic. Like a dreamy Monet print she'd seen in one of her teacher's books. Instead, the castle stood in bold colors under a cloudy sky. More white and maybe some blue? Was blue the answer? Rani stared at the tubes of oil paint on the counter behind the stool. Cobalt? She grabbed a few tubes of paint and squirted them on the palette. The door to the studio squeaked open. Rani ignored the presence entering the room. Dwayne came and sat on the vacated stool. He crossed his arms and stared at the painting.

"I think I realized what's wrong with it." Rani squirted paint onto the palette and mixed different colors, trying to find the right shade.

"Yeah. It's all wrong. Looks like crap."

"What?" she asked.

"Yeah, total crap. I don't know if you can fix it." Dwayne started laughing now.

Rani dabbed his arm with paint, cobalt blue mixing with deep brown, and wrinkled her nose at him.

"Looks fine to me."

"But what does it look like?"

"A castle. A cloudy day."

“See. It isn’t supposed to look like that. It’s supposed to be this castle, this illusion coming out of the clouds, like a fairytale.”

Dwayne grunted and shifted himself on the small stool.

“You need blue then.”

“I—wait. How’d you know that?”

“You think you’re the only one who knows how to paint?” Dwayne asked. “Intro to art right here. Coach wanted me to, what’d he call it? Broaden my horizons. Bullshit. I learned how to sabotage a lot of paintings.”

“What’re you doing in here anyway?” Rani asked.

“See how you’re doing.”

Rani dabbed at the canvas, biting the end of the paintbrush. She hadn’t talked about the incident to anyone. The effort to push it out of her mind became easier while she hid in her paintings and in clay. But now, her mother kept creeping into her thoughts and she hadn’t talked about her to anyone either. How it kept getting worse. It’d be easier to talk about her mother than the incident. Or maybe it wouldn’t have. How would they react? If her grandmother went crazy, and now her mother, and even her sister, what did that mean for her? Would it happen to her? The paintbrush hovered over the canvas. Rani set the palette and brush down. Paint coated her hands and forearms. She pushed the paints and brushes out of the way and sat on the counter.

Dwayne sat staring at her. She could smell his soap and lotion over the scents of clay, turpentine, and paint. Must be five o’clock already. Practice finished at four-thirty, and by the time he showered and talked to everyone, it would be five.

Rani stared at the broken clock hanging over the door, its arms permanently stuck at twelve. "Justus go home?"

"You know he don't like coming in here."

"I haven't told him anything."

"That mean you aren't gonna tell me either." Dwayne stood up but then sat down again, grinning for a moment.

Rani swung her legs and knocked her heels against the cabinet doors. "What do you want me to say?"

"Whatever," Dwayne said. "Not my mind ticking at warp speed."

Rani tugged at the tufts of her hair. She glanced at the paint on her hands and laughed.

"Your hair looks good with a little blue and white mixed in," Dwayne said.

"They're talking about committing my mom." She waited to see his reaction before going forward. Justus would've wrapped his arms around her, would've tried to console her with some comforting word. Good intentions, but not knowing how she really felt. Dwayne sat in the same position, his face remaining neutral. "George doesn't want to let her go. I'm afraid she's gonna hurt Thomas." Rani knocked her heels against the cabinets, harder this time. A satisfying thunk, a rattling echo of wood against wood. "My grandmother killed herself. They think my mom might try. She's tried before. A few times. But--" Rani stopped. It hurt. A twirling kicking in her stomach, an anxiety which caused sweat to slide from her armpits and down her ribs.

"You think she'll do it?" he asked.

"Sometimes. But I think I'm just trying to pretend. She isn't taking her meds and she's messed up more than she's not."

"What if she took her meds?"

"They only help so much. And Thomas' fingers are so far in his mouth I swear he's gonna choke himself. I want to take him out of the house." Rani mixed the blue with some white and dabbed at the painting. Scholarships, portfolios, Thomas. She needed to focus, but she couldn't.

"Breathe, girl." Dwayne stood up. "I'm gonna go get my books, get started on my Calc, and I'll be back in thirty. That give you enough time to find a stopping point?"

Rani jumped off the counter and picked up the palette. "Thanks."

Dwayne squeezed her shoulder and left the studio.

Why'd she talk to him? And why didn't he offer her any advice? It was like he almost cut her off. Think about Justus. Not Dwayne. Justus was the one she thought about when she couldn't sleep. Was the one whose house she went to in the middle of the night. But why? When he was dating Maria, Rani wouldn't go to his house. Instead, she walked down to the beach, sat in the sand and let the water circle around her. But he broke up with Maria almost a year ago. And since then, Rani had moved into his circle. Closer, but not too close. They weren't dating, but they could've been. It was a label.

Rani searched for the fan brush and began to circle the clouds around the castle. Her eyes half closed and her hands moved between the palette and the canvas, hovering in all the places between. The blue began to mute the sides of the castle, and Rani's face slid into a



smile as she dabbed a different brush in alternating angles. Again, she used the fan brush to circle clouds in and around the castle.

Rani watched Dwayne fiddle with the radio as he pulled out of the student parking lot. The palm trees and palmettos studded the entrance to the lot and Rani thought of the plot of land she used to go to when she was younger. When she would run out of the house and go hide under the trees, behind the palmettos. A few years ago, they built a subdivision on that tract of land. Rani didn't need that spot anymore. She missed the woods, but she didn't need them like she used to. It was getting easier to find an escape, a place to think, without the trees surrounding her and the humming of insects blocking out external noise. But what did she need? If she needed Justus, why didn't she take him? Let him be a part of her life?

"The painting looked good," Dwayne said.

"Thanks. It clicked." Rani stared out the window of the car, her eyes sliding over the houses, over the trees coated with Spanish moss. "Thanks for the ride."

"You shouldn't be walking home in the dark."

Rani nodded. "Is he mad at me?" she asked.

"Don't make me the middleman, Rain. Go talk to him."

"I can't. It—" Rani rubbed her eyes and chewed on her thumbnail.

"But?" he asked.

"But I can't tell him that. What if it isn't true?"

"Wouldn't you know? Either way?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"But?" Dwayne teased her.

"What if I go back and forth?"

"You gotta figure out what's holding you back."

*A fucked up family. You forgot that part. Say it. Come on. Say it.* But he didn't.

Dwayne let it go unspoken. But she knew he thought it. He had to have thought it or else his presence just wouldn't make sense. For the past year, he started talking to Rani, giving her rides, talking to her about Justus, about life in general. He even played basketball with Rani, something she couldn't do very well. For one, she was short. But more important, her hand-eye coordination plain stunk. But attempting to play the game made her laugh, even when she fouled him by hugging his arms, or when she shot air balls from the 3-point line, or when she picked up the ball and ran with it instead of attempting her stilted dribbling. Rani knocked her head against the headrest and shifted. Dwayne's hand reached across and squeezed her forearm. Not the knee, but her arm. She smiled at him. A real smile, even though it was a tired one.

"You got work to do tonight?" Dwayne asked.

"Yeah. A test tomorrow. History. Yippee. Only a few more days until break."

What wasn't he asking? Did she want him to come inside? Make sure everything was okay? Was there any food in the house? Her stomach kicked and gurgled. She shared a Pop Tart with Thomas that morning. Lunch slid past while she stood in the studio. And dinner. Was there anything?

"I'll be home--if you want to talk," Dwayne said.

He pulled into her driveway. The bathroom light was on and so was the kitchen light. Her mother's truck was in the driveway. Rani wondered what she was doing. Where was Thomas? Stuck with Dori. Alone all day. Mrs. B would've been there. *Don't feel guilty.* What if Dori went wandering? But if she did, Rani couldn't go get her like last time. Driving without her license, her feet struggling to reach the pedals because in her nervousness she couldn't figure out how to move the seat forward in the pickup.

"Thanks for the ride."

She paused before moving. Dwayne stared at her. It was impossible to read his expression in the growing darkness of the evening, but Rani tried to imagine. Let him come inside and make sure everything's okay. No. Don't be afraid. I can't be afraid. Rani grabbed her backpack and waved as Dwayne pulled out of the driveway. The house waited. Inside, Rani set her bag down.

"Tommy?" The kitchen was empty. Thomas' crayons were spread across the kitchen table, a few on the floor. Rani picked them up and stared at the picture he had been drawing. A red Dori. "Thomas?"

Rani felt a pain in her chest. The bathroom. Those lights were on. She ran upstairs, but the bathroom door was locked. She rattled the doorknob and tried to peek through the keyhole, but it only gave her a view of the sink.

"Thomas?" Open the door. Please be okay. Maybe Dori went for a walk. Thomas could be alone. But he never locked the bathroom door unless Rosaline was on a rampage.

Rani pressed her ear against the door. "Thomas?" A splash. A whimper. "Tommy. Tommy open the door!"

She pounded her fists on the locked door. Fuck. George. Where was George? He should've been in the house. Rani ran for the garage. There, she found George in the wingback, a guitar in his lap.

"Thomas is locked in the bathroom. With Dori."

George ran past her, his bare feet padding across the driveway and the porch. Rani followed him upstairs and watched as he shouldered the door. She felt as if her chest were going to explode. Not enough air seemed to slide into her lungs and she felt as if Rosaline had a pillow over her face. The lock gave under George's third attempt and Rani held her breath. Let him be okay. Let Momma be okay. Please let her be okay. Let them be all right. Please.

"Dori. Oh Dori, baby," George said.

Rani came into the bathroom, her eyes shifting from Dori's naked body sprawled in the tub, to the blood dripping on the linoleum, into the water, down Dori's arms. And Thomas. Wide-eyed Thomas, his fingers in his mouth, crouched in the tub by Dori's legs. He shivered, his blue lips pursed around his fingers.

"911, Rani." George didn't turn away from Dori. "Go call."

Rani scooped Thomas out of the water, held his cold and wet body against her own and ran toward Dori's bedroom. She tried to set Thomas on the bed, but he wouldn't let go of her. As she dialed the phone, Rani pulled at the bedspread and wrapped it around her brother.

"My mother. 98 Palmetto. Suicide attempt. Shock. My brother. Help me." Her words blurred as she shouted them into the phone. *Someone help us, help me, help.*

Thomas whimpered and clung at Rani's neck. He was hurting her, but Rani squeezed him back. The bedroom floor comforted her in its solidity beneath her as she slunk down to her knees and rocked her brother.

"It's okay, kiddo. It'll be okay. Shh." Rani rocked and rubbed his back. "I love you, Tommy. I love you. It'll be all right. It's over. Shh."

## Old Man Diatro

The phone rang during dinner and Eleanor answered it. Gus studied the flickering candle and then glanced at Eleanor's plate. Half her salmon remained to be eaten and she had been halfway through a stalk of asparagus when she got up to answer the phone. Gus munched on his salad and glanced at Eleanor. They never used to answer the phone during meals. Only since they'd given their number to Rani and Thomas, for emergencies, had they answered. Eleanor spoke in hushed tones, hung up the phone and came and stood next to him.

"What? We're not finishing dinner are we?" he asked.

Eleanor smiled as she blew out the candles. "We have to go to the hospital. Rani phoned. Dori and Thomas. I'll tell you on the way."

Gus almost knocked his chair over as he stood up and carried the plates to the counter. "Is she okay? Will Thomas be all right? God, why won't he commit her?"

"I'll drive, love," Eleanor said.

He followed her into the garage, his face drawing itself into a scowl. On the road, Eleanor drove in smooth, relaxed motions. Gus shifted in his seat, finally pulling *Paradise Lost* out of his back pocket and putting it in the pocket of his jacket.

"What'd she say exactly?"

"We're almost there, babe." Eleanor patted Gus's leg.

"Tell me," Gus said.

"I guess Dori tried to kill herself and Thomas was with her. He's in shock, so they have him in a bed. Don't question Rani about it. It took a lot for her to call us. You know that."

“I know. But at least she can do that, right?”

Eleanor smiled and nodded at him in response. Did that mean it wasn't enough? That Eleanor thought they should be doing more? What could he do? Pull the kids out of the home? But then they'd be separated and what about George? Needed to get Dori out of there. Get the spell broken for George.

At the hospital, Gus wanted to run across the parking lot, but Eleanor grabbed his hand and walked with him toward the large building. The evening was cool, almost cold, and Gus noticed Eleanor quicken her pace as she tugged her thin jacket around her body. They made their way down halls and upstairs to the third floor. Sometimes Gus hated the fact that Eleanor feared elevators. He felt his chest heave as they made it toward the nurse's station in the pediatrics' unit.

The nurse smiled over the stack of metal clipboards in her hand. “Rani said her grandparents were coming,” she said. “You must be them. They're in room 305.”

Gus raised an eyebrow to Eleanor and tried not to smile. They walked down the bright hallway and stopped in front of Thomas' half open door. Rani had crawled onto the bed with him, curled on the side opposite of the iv. Gus pushed the door open and he and Eleanor took seats next to the bed. The room was painted in bright colors, pictures of jungle animals decorated the walls. And yet, it was still a hospital room.

“I'm going to talk to the nurse,” Eleanor kissed his cheek as she left.

On the bed, Rani shifted around Thomas before opening her eyes.

“Why didn't you wake me up? I'm sorry.” Rani said, her eyes darting from Gus to the window, and back to Thomas.

"We just got here. Eleanor's talking to the nurse."

"Thanks for coming. I--I didn't know what to do. They, um--they kicked George out of the hospital. He wanted to take Dori home and they told him she needs to be held in the psych ward." Rani's voice began to quiver as she stared at her brother. She brushed his hair off his forehead and tugged at his ear. "Don't let her come home." Her big gray-blue eyes stared at Gus. "Please," she said.

Gus stood and came to the side of the bed. "Eleanor will stay here. I'll go find him. I promise."

Got to stop it. Can't be like before. I won't let it happen. Not like Beth-Anne. Don't put Thomas and Rani through this. Goddammit why won't he commit her? Gus thought of Beth-Anne covered in blood, the sheets soaked with the red of strawberry jam, of Judge kneeling beside the bed crying. It couldn't happen again. Damn him. Damn you, George.

Once he left the hospital, Gus tried the house first, but George's car wasn't there. The Mill, maybe. Gus drove past the wooden building, the turning wheel and the splashing water, but he didn't see any sign of George. With the defrost going, Gus peered out of the clearing windshield. The pier. Gus took walks with Eleanor there, staring at the fishermen, the water, the sky. They would sometimes watch the space shuttles launch from the pier. George's car was there. The Cadillac screeched into the nearest parking spot and Gus trotted toward the pier. He glanced at the scattered fisherman smoking and talking next to the railings. At the end, he found George sitting on a bench. George sat with his arms crossed over his chest



either as he tried to keep himself warm or tried to contain his anger. Gus dropped down beside George, his breathing heavy.

"I need to start exercising again," Gus said. "I can barely breathe."

"Fuck." George scooted away from Gus. "I'm not doing it."

"Well, I don't know if they're going to give you a choice this time," Gus said.

"Don't I have a choice? Doesn't she? What're you talking about?"

"What about Thomas? What's it going to take?"

"No," George said. "No--" He put his head in his hands and began to cry, his body jerking with sobs. "I should've been in the house. Mrs. B told me she was leaving for the night. Said Dori was asleep. I should've gone in."

Gus scooted closer to him and placed his hand on George's back. An old man's hand, Gus thought. He stared at the age spots, and the curving of his fingers from the beginning stages of arthritis. When he was younger, he couldn't help Beth-Anne. Only in slight ways could he even help Judge. That was before they had medicine. More often, they just committed the person without knowing how to help. But Gus wondered, now, even if they had medicine if it would've helped. Even when Dori took her handfuls of pills, they sometimes helped and more often didn't. But would her absence break George? Gus watched Judge fall into himself, pull away from Dori, from his work. He shuffled around the house in his bathrobe, unshaven and his underarms reeking. But hadn't George already done that? He'd been hiding in the garage for so long—denial. *Say something, you coward. Help him. Them.*

“Eleanor’s staying at the hospital. They want to keep Thomas overnight. Just make sure he’s all right. He’ll be okay, though.”

“I love her. So much,” George said.

Gus nodded. Just like Judge. Didn’t notice his child. Couldn’t. Because that would make him commit Dori. It would separate the two of them, and George didn’t want to think about that. His life had been simplified. Only showed up to work once a week if that, stopped leaving the house, and he created the garage into a livable existence. Except he was missing the growth of his son. Didn’t he realize that? He had to notice. It had taken Judge a long time to come back—until the birth of Rosaline and Rani. And by then, it was too late. Gus shook his head. He wanted to be a hero, but he didn’t fit the role. In reality, he was just an old man nosing his way into the neighbor’s business. *Aren’t I? Who am I trying to kid? Why do I think I can help them? I failed with Beth-Anne. God, why did she have to kill herself? What is it in their minds that can’t be controlled?*

“I’m cold,” George mumbled.

“Thank God,” Gus said. “Let’s go.”

They walked down the pier in silence. Gus stuffed his hands in his coat pockets and he fingered the pages of his book. Soft and dog-eared pages slid beneath the tips of his fingers. Gus smiled and felt his questions go mute for a moment. He carried the book with him when he enlisted in the Army, he taught parts of it to the seniors, and he read it to his children.

“You’re going to make sure I do it, aren’t you?” George asked.

“I suppose.” Gus pulled his hands out of his pockets and shrugged his shoulders.

“Really, it’s up to you, right?”

“Hm. That isn’t what you said.”

“No. True. But I’m just an old man, George. What do I know?”

George attempted a smile and Gus gave one of his own. Gus glanced at the younger man and tried to picture the Judge, tried to imagine himself forty years ago. A thick head of hair, no wrinkles, no stray hairs growing out of his ears and nose. No hardships and shadows covering the soul. Things felt easy then, understandable. The way the four of them used to go out to the Mill and drink from the bottles. Or the way Beth-Anne and Eleanor would run into the waves, their dresses sticking to the curves of their bodies. How beautiful Eleanor was then. How beautiful she still was. Even if he had gotten boring, Eleanor still loved him. They still loved one another. Gus glanced at George again. This man had no knowledge of those things. He was young, too young. And the woman he loved couldn’t love him back. Couldn’t push beyond the illness holding her in a silent vise. Gus felt an ache in his chest. *I can help Dori, but how can I help George?*

Rani came home with him and Eleanor. She didn’t say much, just sat by the pond with a quilt around her shoulders. The next morning, she went out to pick oranges and Eleanor called the high school to explain her absence. Gus took George back to the hospital. The social worker sat in front of them. Gus waited.

“You were in here just a few weeks ago I believe. With your daughter—um, Mariella Rain.” The social worker flipped through her file to confirm her belief before continuing.

“You come in here now because Dori’s tried to kill herself and your little boy is so far

withdrawn that he won't speak or eat. And you want me to just let her go home? To let the children go home?"

George shifted in the chair and glanced down at his hands. Gus wanted to agree with the woman, to tell George he needed to let go, but how could he convince him?

"What if I take the children for a while?" Gus asked.

"That's only a temporary solution." Again, the social worker flipped through her file. "George isn't working. There are accounts of the youngest daughter passing out from hunger, there has been no food in the house on several visits, on two visits the house was unfit to live in--why shouldn't I take the children?"

Gus glanced at George. He still hadn't looked up. Why shouldn't she? Come on, old man, think of a reason why. Love? Is that strong enough of a reason? Think of a deal. You bargained with your students. How difficult can this be?

"What if I care for the children until George is capable?" Gus threw out a line. Would she bite? Her glasses sat on the tip of her nose, her hair styled in brown wisps around her head.

"That's it?" she asked. "These children need stability. Shifting them around is the last thing they need. Christmas is a week away. They need to be children."

Okay, it was gonna be difficult. They'd been in there for thirty minutes already. George trying to plead his case. But he had nothing to stand on. Gus knew that even before they went into her office. How can you stand on a love that doesn't really exist except in your mind? Impossible. Gus wanted to pull his book out of his pocket, but he resisted the

temptation and instead shifted his weight from one side of his body to the next. Damn chairs were uncomfortable.

“What if Dori goes into a home—”

“Gus, no,” George said.

“—and I would check in on the house twice a day to make sure there’s plenty of food and cleanliness?” Gus said.

“Hmm. Sounds good, doesn’t it?” The woman smiled for a moment and then pursed her lipstick-coated lips. “But what about love? What about emotional support?”

“Wait a minute.” Gus moved forward in his chair. “Those two children love each other. Far deeper than any of us can imagine. And George loved his children. I think he still does.”

George raised his head. He was crying again. “Yeah—yes. Of course.”

Gus wanted to punch him. That was the best effort he could give? Damn, he did love those children. Gus remembered. The way he showed off Thomas. A glow in his face, a constant smile. *Look at my son. He’s a part of me.* Or the time he learned how to braid Rani’s hair and bought her the first set of pastels she ever owned. There was love there. But what happened to it? George couldn’t continue to deny himself, to deny the children.

“I’ll give you two weeks,” she said. “Two weeks. Do you hear me? Both of you? If those children are not happy, well-fed, and safe, they’re out of there. Straight to foster care. Understand?”

Gus nodded and mumbled a thanks. Two weeks? What could be done in two weeks? He needed to tend to the oranges. In two weeks, the fruit would start to fall off the trees on

their own, the oranges rotting. Could he fix the house in two weeks? Rani couldn't help. Needed to finish her portfolio. They couldn't tell her. Eleanor would help. The kids could help with the trees.

He stood and extended his hand. The woman had a firm handshake, a soft hand and manicured nails. George pulled himself out of his chair and shook the woman's hand as well.

"I do love my children," George said.

"I'm sure you do, Mr. Hewitt. Unfortunately, love sometimes isn't enough."

Gus held the door open for George. They walked in silence down the corridor and out into the afternoon sunshine. The weather warmed up again, the palm trees swaying in the slight breeze and a hint of humidity sliding through the air. Two weeks. So much to do. But it could happen.

## George

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, staring out the rain-soaked window. Last week, he followed Mrs. B around the grocery, the list and pen in his hand so he could cross off the items they put into the already-full cart. Her tiny body strode down the aisles as she rattled off hints for him to remember. Thomas likes the heels of the bread with peanut butter and banana, otherwise he doesn't like crust at all. Rani needs yogurt and she likes red grapes better than green. Make sure there is plenty of fruit in the bowl on the table. If fruit flies get to be a bother, put the bananas in the cabinet. Keep plenty of milk in the refrigerator. Skim milk. Thomas doesn't like whole milk. He thinks it's too thick. George filed the information into his head, slipping it between the medical bills he needed to pay and the story he needed to finish for the paper before it went to print tomorrow morning.

Now, as the rain rattled on the top of the car, George tilted his head back and tapped it against the headrest. There was a story he needed to put a few finishing touches on. Tonight was his night to give Thomas a bath. *I promised him.* He unbuckled the seatbelt and tucked his chin against his chest as he ran from the car to the grocery store, trying to avoid getting soaked by the cool, night rain. Dori loved the rain. Used to make him go for walks with her during downpours. And now, George watched Rani do the same thing. Watched her sit outside on the bottom step of the porch, exposed to the sky, to the rain, to the mist. That's the only time George saw Dori in Rani. *Thank god. No. Don't say that. Dori isn't bad. My sweet Dori. It isn't her fault.*

The lights in the grocery store made George blink and squint. Exposed. Everything laid out. Metal carts leered like cages in a row, and George's mind slipped to Dori. Did she hate him because he left her there? His mental grocery list vanished and his focus became lotion. A few weeks ago, lotion was the one thing that brought him out of the safety of the dark garage and to the glowing aisles of the grocery store. He didn't have to scan the overhead aisle signs—he knew where the lotion was—he knew instinctively. The way Thomas knew how to get to the bathroom in every place they entered. Thomas knew toilets. George knew lotion. And he knew which stores carried the best brands. None of that fairy-stuff. He didn't like to smell like a woman and he didn't like the stuff that slid on like Crisco and left handprints on the table. Smooth. Scentless.

George gripped his hands around the cart and pushed it down the aisles. Twelve-packs of soda stacked in towers, tortillas chips, cookies, bread. He wandered down the aisles, his vision blurring from defining objects to defining the colors. Pink and aqua. Blue and red. Green. Maybe it wasn't lotion, really, that brought him out of the garage. Dori's smile, the way she took his hands and kissed his palms, his fingertips. *Get her out of your head. She's gone. Lost.* George felt like he, too, was lost. Floating through his day. Through his life. It had been only three days. Some of the longest days of his life. They ranked up there with when the illness first began. When she stopped remembering she was pregnant. She wanted to drink and George kept finding her in the backyard with a half empty bottle of cheap wine. The grass drank gallons of white wine during those late summer, earlier fall nights. Or when she tried to quiet Thomas by putting her hands over his mouth. George



grabbed his son, scolding Dori like a child, singing to the both of them. Made-up songs. Did Thomas remember that? Did Dori?

November. Thomas was born in the beginning of November. When the nights would get somewhat cool and the confederate jasmine would open its white blossoms and scent the night air with a sweet odor he wanted to taste. George wrote editorials then. Six years ago he made a name for himself. Assistant editor. And he'd come home, fired up and excited to show Dori the layout. Excited to hold his son. But Dori stopped studying the layout with him. And when she did, her eyes glazed and she stared into the distance. Somewhere George couldn't go.

He tried. Really. But she slapped at him. Started screaming and then slapping herself. He restrained her. Held her down as her body bucked and she sobbed and wretched and cried. *Let me go. Let me die. Don't let me be like her.* Dori felt the illness consume her; she warned George, but he laughed at her. Told her not to be silly. Silly. The ache, the terror, replaced the laughter, the silliness. George wanted to scream. To hurt someone, to hurt anything if only he could keep Dori safe.

As Dori slipped deeper into her delusions, Thomas slept in the next room instead of the cradle at the foot of their bed. A room with trains bordering the top of the walls. A border he and Dori picked out together when the medication was working. A room with a portrait Rani painted in her first studio class. Of the family. With George and Thomas and Dori in between the two girls. A family. Thomas cooing, kicking his legs. Rani laughing at her brother. Running to change his diaper. Until she stopped, startled to find George and her mother on the floor of Thomas' bedroom, holding each other, silent, sweat-soaked from their

struggle. George shook his head at Rani, at the question mark of her face. She closed the door and walked away from George. Until now. But even now, she only crept back in hesitant moments. A breath. But she kept coming back. That much was certain.

George flexed his hands inside the pockets of his slacks, imagining the hands cracking. *Lotion. I need lotion for my hands.* Dry white lines, the creases of his skin between his thumb and forefinger, the etches and swirls of his skin. His own. Keep your hands in your pockets--no one can see them there—but he knew. George knew. He needed the fucking lotion. For Dori. But Dori wasn't with him. She wouldn't be home. Only Thomas and Rani. An empty bedroom. Permanent. He couldn't pretend she'd be home in the middle of the night. Pretend that he'd help her into the bathtub and wash away the sand coating her feet and calves, the sand in her hair, stuck to her scalp. She wouldn't be coming home. He took care of that.

"Georgey don't leave me. Please. I'll be a good girl." She screamed after him. On her hands and knees in the empty and sterile hallway. The orderlies holding her back. "George. I love you, baby. Georgey." She called after him.

His body tightened, the sweat slipping down the small of his back. The men held her firmly, but their voices were soft. Her long blonde hair hung around her face, hiding her hazel eyes, her pale skin, the small red mouth he used to kiss. The orderlies avoided her forearms, the bandages concealing her botched attempt. One of the several. But this time, they said she was unfit for society. A danger to herself and to her children. George wanted to hurt them. Tell them to let her go. He felt his face flush and turned from her, his heart racing. *Don't look back.* He couldn't look back. Because he'd take her away from them. Away from their

starched white uniforms. Away from the bars and the absence of shiny, sharp objects.

*Another chance*, he would mumble to them. The medication will work. I'll make sure she takes it. Yes, sir. I can take care of her. Our son will be fine. Please. The scene took place over and over. Ever since Thomas was born. But now. He couldn't do it this time. Rani stopped the cycle. The girl made him pause, stare at himself, at his family. Leave her. Leave a part of myself, he thought.

Think. George stopped in an aisle and glanced around himself. The cart was nowhere to be found, and he stood surrounded by jars of baby food. Instead of his fingers curled around the shopping cart, George's hands were in his pockets. He ripped them out and flexed them in the air in front of him. The skin on his back prickled. How long had he been wandering the aisles? But he couldn't pull out. He didn't want to. Not here. Lotion. Dori bought him his first bottle of lotion seven years ago. She loved his hands soft. Insisted they be so. Soft to touch her behind her ears and in the hollow of her collarbone. Lotiony-soft hands. He kept them soft to hold Thomas. In hopes to hold Dori again. It became his own obsession. To file his nails. Push back the cuticles. Clean under his nails before he showered. Or after he cut the lawn or made mudpies with Thomas. When Thomas was little more than a toddler. Did he remember the mudpies? He didn't make them anymore. Instead, he followed Rani. Went to the beach. To the woods. To Justus' house.

Justus. Good family. But he'll hurt her. Hurt Rani. The girl can't be that strong. But she's stronger than me. *You coward*. George stopped living. Stopped cutting the lawn. Stopped showering. Stopped holding his son and feeling him grow, measuring him by the way he fit in his arms, against his chest, against his belly. George was strong enough only to slide

into the garage and sit in the darkness by himself. Created a darkness like the one Dori found. Hers internal, his external—but darkness all the same.

But it wasn't, really. The music comforted him. Buddy Guy, Harry Connick, and Big Mama. An out-of-tune guitar with a broken string rested in his lap while the music played. Even though George had no idea how to play the guitar, he closed his eyes and moved his fingers along the guitar's neck, pretending. Rest his head in the corner of the wingback and breathe Dori's incense, which weaved its scent between the stacked furniture and boxes. Things that belonged to Beth-Anne, Dori's mother. Things that belonged to the Judge. Things that belonged to Dori when she used to care about things. Before she started throwing chairs and carpets and endtables in the front yard. Burning them or leaving them to be rained on or picked up by the garbage men. Oriental rugs, the antique cherry wood table, the baby pictures of the girls and of Thomas, or Dori herself. In the cluttered depths of the garage, George created a haven. But Dori didn't have that. She would never have that. Why wouldn't the medicine help her? Why?

A young girl in designer overalls and clunky sneakers pushing a grocery cart loaded with frozen bagels and fruit and toilet paper rammed into George's heels. He glanced up, amazed that he still hadn't made it to the lotion aisle. Where the fuck was his mind? Stop thinking. Stop thinking.

"Mr. Hewitt?"

"Hm—what?" George asked.

The girl squinshed her forehead and stared at George. "Aren't you Mr. Hewitt?"

"Yeah—yes." George felt the sweat collecting on his lower back.

“I’m Sarah. I don’t know if you remember me. It’s been awhile since I’ve been around. How’s Rosaline?”

Rosaline. “Um—she’s doing well. Moved out.”

“Really? I just moved into my own apartment too. It’s so much fun. Could you tell her I said hi.”

George attempted to utter a reply, but Sarah already moved away from him, clunking her way past jars of spaghetti sauce and pasta. Calm down, asshole. Breathe, goddammit. Where’d Rosaline go? What if she came back? God, she’d ruin everything if she came back. But Harry called from the club looking for her, said she hadn’t been coming to work. Over a month ago. She had to have left. Gone south. West Palm, Fort Lauderdale, Miami. George shook his head and headed toward the lotion aisle. He stretched his fingers, making wings out of his pockets and then clenched the fabric in his hand and pulled. Lotion. He stood in front of the bottles. White. Yellow. Fruit-covered. Straight, bold letters. Or pretty and solid script. But the words blurred and his hands began to ache from holding on to the fabric. He wanted to let go. Needed to let go.

It wasn’t his choice to send her away. The church ladies. No. It was Thomas. *Your choice, you liar.* She would’ve hurt Thomas. Would’ve hurt herself. Just like her mother. *All the time I spent worrying about losing her to another man, I end up losing her to herself.* And the visit this morning tore at his gut. Made him want to puke on the white, spotless linoleum floor. Block it out. Block her out. He blinked and tried to read the bottles again. But they shifted and Dori’s face slid into his mind’s eye. Dori girl. My girl. Beautiful Dori. *But she’s fucking crazy.* Locked her up just like they tried to do to her mother. She was

mine. She was never mine. *I loved her. I love her.* If I take her out, she'll die. Just like her mother. Ruin another bed. Ruin another beautiful body. Blood. All that blood.

George stared down at his shoes. Black shiny shoes against the stark floor. His hands cramped. He flexed his jaw and breathed. Closed his eyes, long lashes brushing his cheeks, and breathed. Let her go. Let it go, man. *You crazy fuck. Just as crazy as she is.* Isn't your fault. It isn't your fault. He opened one eye and then the other. George glanced both ways down the aisle—empty. He stared again, harder, squishing together his eyebrows and tried to concentrate on the lotion bottles. Vaseline Intensive Care. Lubraderm. Neutrogena. What was he looking for? George couldn't remember. Couldn't picture the empty bottle he threw away that morning. What the fuck was it?

Red letters. Dori's blank face. White bottle. Dori's long, beautiful hair shaved because she had been pulling it out in raw clumps. A flip-top lid. Dori crouched in the corner of the room, not letting him get too close. Today the visit to the hospital hurt him somewhere deep inside. Somewhere he didn't want to go to, not yet. George blinked at tears. Blinked at the images. *Breathe.* Hands loosening, fingers extending. He reached out for something, for nothing. He stared at his hand—at the smooth manicured hand. No cracks, no dry lines. Trimmed nails, perfect half moon cuticles.

The urge to run out of the grocery store consumed George, his face going red. *I need to talk to someone.* I need to get out of here. God. What am I doing? He pulled his hand away from the lotion as if it was a dog that had tried to bite him. Instead, George headed toward the milk aisle. Get milk for Thomas. Milk and some cereal. The kid loved cereal. Not just the sugary fruit rings, but the healthy stuff too. Because he saw Rani eat it. Rani

needs to eat. How'd she get so skinny? Sharp angles and loose clothes. Why didn't I notice? Stop it. You notice now. Dammit. You see them now. Help them. Who's gonna help me? Shit.

Skim milk. Fruit rings. Granola. Bananas. George cradled the items in his arms, against his deep blue button down shirt. He took the tie off in the car. The job was okay, writing for his father's paper again. Had to go out and interview, research. He hated having to drive in the traffic. In Jacksonville or Daytona. He especially hated Orlando. So crowded. So loud. The solitude of the garage softened him. Magnified his senses.

The girl at the check out counter smiled at him. Thick make-up hid her eyes and she snapped bright pink gum with her straight, white teeth. Older than Rani he guessed. College. Maybe younger than Rosaline. Rosaline. Fuck. Let her go. But he couldn't. The fear of not being able to stop touching her, of still sitting in the garage, tugged at George like a child on his pantleg. How long had he been hiding from himself?

With a long deep breath, he paid the girl, finding comfort in the large amount of bills filling his wallet, bills he earned, not given to him by his father, charity money. George grabbed the bag of groceries in one hand and the jug of milk in the other. The doors of the grocery slid open and George hesitated. People moved past him, with and without carts. Women running into the grocery, their purses held over their heads to protect themselves from the falling rain. Styled hair. Light makeup, still dressed up from work. Pantyhose and heels. Housewives with children's hands clasped in their own and college girls too conscious about their looks. Guys rushing in. For beer, for last minute items their wives must've needed for dinner that night. George's eyes moved from the rain falling in front of him to the

lights in the parking lot, and he noticed the way the rain slanted and misted against the lights. Instead of running to the car, he straightened his shoulders and walked out into the rainy night.



## Rani

She sat at the kitchen table and fingered the edges of her license. Hers. A small picture to the left, with under twenty-one stamped across it. A yellow stripe across the top. Florida. Rani Hewitt. 183 Palmetto Ave. Mine. Rani felt herself smile.

The house creaked overhead. George had carried Thomas upstairs. He'd fallen asleep at the DMV. Afternoon sunlight filtered through the window and spread across the linoleum. Clean. Light blue. Rani shifted in the chair, leaned back and clicked the license on the table top. Her eyes scanned the room. No dishes in the sink, only in the draining board. Clean dishes. A bowl of fruit sat in the middle of the kitchen table. Apples. Bananas. Oranges. The Old Man's oranges. It felt too good. Too unreal. *I'm not allowed to be happy. Yes, I am. I am.* She clicked the license once more before sliding it into the back pocket of her jean-shorts.

George came into the kitchen, grabbing a cup from the draining board and opening the refrigerator. He pulled out the orange juice and poured himself some.

"Want any?" He raised the carton to Rani.

She shook her head, gazing out the window again.

"You did really well today." He sat at the other end of the table. "Really good—" He took a swig of his orange juice. "Sorry it took so long."

"It's okay." Rani jumped in.

"I just. I'm—"

"Thanks for taking me," Rani said.

"Yeah," George nodded. "Hey, the pickup's all yours. I think the keys are in the drawer of the desk. I can give you money for gas." George pulled his wallet out of his pants and slid a twenty across the table. "Make sure you always keep a quarter of a tank in it."

"Are you sure?" Rani felt herself blush as she looked at the twenty. She was afraid to take it. Really, she wanted to grab it.

"Why not? Don't worry, I'll make you pay me back." George laughed, his eyes squinshing for a moment. "It'd be a lot of help if you could pick up Thomas sometimes. My dad's got me doing a lot of coverage in Orlando, so I won't be able to. And well, the ladies at church—"

"I got it." Rani ruffled her hands through her hair.

"All right, then." George downed the rest of his juice and pushed back from the table.

Rani watched as he rinsed the glass and set it in the draining board. The way his small hands seemed to cover things, spread themselves out. She used to be scared of his hands. Like Rosaline's. But the past few weeks, she watched him with Thomas. Watched as Thomas softened, fell into his father, and now looked for him when he came home. Jealous at first, Rani wanted to stop it. To make Thomas hate George. But really, she wanted to love George too. She wanted a daddy. Like Thomas did. And at least Thomas still came into her room. Her room. Pushing open the door and standing with sleepy eyes and his cowlick bobbing. *Tuck me in*, he mumbled. She'd run at him, swoop him up and tickle him. Say, *no problem, kiddo*. Tuck him into bed. Sometimes fall asleep next to him. She needed Thomas. She needed George.

"I'm gonna mow the backyard. Gus lent me his mower. Then I'm gonna try to seed the front yard. Get some grass out there again. Go out if you want."

She bit at her bottom lip and nodded. George disappeared into the back of the house and Rani heard the door close behind him. It still felt too weird. Too normal. Fuck it. She grabbed the twenty and an apple. In the den, Rani stood in front of the desk. Her grandfather's desk. Her mother's desk. George had cleaned it out, set up a computer his father had given to him last month. She swallowed a lump that had slid into her throat and opened the top drawer. Her mother's keys were nestled next to her wallet and next to a bunch of letters held together by a rubberband.

The lawn mower started in the backyard, but Rani still glanced over her shoulder. She set the apple on the desktop and pulled out the envelopes and studied the handwriting. A man's. All addressed to Dori Hewitt. They were from George. Rani noticed the tight slant of his handwriting. She glanced at the address and noticed it wasn't theirs, but the hospital's. The lump returned to Rani's throat. Letters. George loved her mother. Wrote to her. At least ten letters were in the bundle. Letters George never even sent.

Did he want me to find them? Did he forget he put them here? Rani rubbed the arch of her foot across her shin. She hesitated. Went to undo the rubberband. *No. No. Not like her. I won't be like her.* These are his things. Rani dropped the bundle back into the drawer, picked up her mother's keys and left the house, the apple remaining on top of the desk.

The pickup started on the first try, a loud rumbling accompanying the roaring lawn mower. Rani smiled as she slid her hands around the steering wheel and then felt under the seat so she could pull it forward. She rolled down the window and adjusted the side mirror.

Next, she messed with the rearview mirror. As she tilted the mirror, she stopped and studied herself in the reflection. At her pixie cut. Messy black wisps of hair. Sometimes, it still shocked her. She still expected to see her long hair, to feel the warmth of it on her back. But there was nothing. *Weightlessness.*

Before she slid the truck into reverse, Rani caught sight of George next to the garage. He had taken off his shirt. His hands hung over the steering wheel of the lawn mower, his back straight. He'd lost the pale empty expression set into his face. Now, he played with Thomas. Went to the beach with them. He liked to bodysurf in the waves. He sucked at it, but he tried. Made Thomas laugh. Made Rani laugh too. But it was too hard to imagine him as a father. Lately, he had been like a brother maybe. Like Justus used to be. *Rosaline. I want to hate him. Hate her. Try to forget. Try.* Think of him with Thomas. Of Thomas laughing when George crawls around with him on his back. Think of those things.

Rani slid the truck into reverse and inched out the driveway. Once on Palmetto, she took a breath, shifted into drive and left. At Justus', Rani parked in front of the house and climbed out of the pickup. She cut through the bushes and walked across his lawn. Loud music and the sound of laughter came from behind the house. Rani slid open the gate and peeked around the side of the house. Sure enough, Justus, his brother Josh, and a group of guys were playing ball. Josh caught a pass and attempted a dunk; instead, the ball popped off the rim and shot toward the pool.

"Get it, get it." Josh shouted, his hands clasping his head.

The ball went over the edge and into the water with a silent splash.

Rani shook her head and moved toward the court.

Josh smiled at her. "You were supposed to get that."

"Me?" Rani raised an eyebrow. "Let me jump in and get it for you."

Justus turned at the sound of her voice. "Don't listen to him. He'll throw you in."

"Not Josh," Rani said. She shook her head and sat at a patio table between the court and the pool.

"Did Kim drop you off?" Justus sat next to her. She could smell his sweat, see his bare chest move with his gasping breath.

"Nope." Rani dangled the keys.

Justus grabbed them from her. "No way. Hey, she finally did it." Justus swung the keys around his finger and hollered.

Rani dropped her face into her hands.

"Really?" Josh rocked her chair. "Way to go, Rain."

"Thanks." Rani mumbled through her hands.

"Where're we going?" Justus asked.

"You've got to finish the game. I forgot. Guess I got a little excited."

She knew they played every Friday afternoon unless they had an away game. Just like she stayed after school Monday through Wednesday to work in the studio. How could she forget? This time was his. She always felt like she stumbled in, intruded. Even after so many years, the feeling still arose, instead of the comfort. She felt the sweat break out along the small of her back even though the day was warm, but not overly hot. Damn.

“Playlinda? Come on.” Justus ruffled her hair. “I’m gonna jump in the pool, and go change.” He kicked off his sneakers as he spoke. Before she could respond, he dove into the pool and disappeared.

“Are you stealing my point guard?” Dwayne sat down in the chair next to Rani.

She smiled at him and nodded. “It was an accident. I forgot.” She traced the different shapes in the glass tabletop.

“Girl, why are you gonna apologize. Take the man off my hands. He’s been playing lousy.”

“What?” Justus hollered from the pool, his head appearing at the edge.

“You heard me, woman.” Dwayne yelled back. “Terrible,” he said to Rani.

Rani bit her lip to keep from laughing. Dwayne always offered a release. Always talked to everyone. Especially if he wanted to get them to smile. He comforted Rani in so many awkward situations. Really, she wondered how much he knew. How much Justus told him, how much she ended up telling him in bits and pieces. Rani watched Justus push himself out of the water, his arm muscles flexing, the water dripping from his basketball shorts. Beautiful. He disappeared into the house, closing the French door behind him.

“What an ugly shot!” Dwayne yelled to someone on the court. “Uug-lee!”

Rani watched the sun reflecting off the water. Lawn chairs and recliners dotted the stones around the pool. The music came from rock-shaped speakers spaced in the garden. Rani always felt like she had fallen into the pages of a magazine in Justus’ backyard. Between the three-quarter size court, the pool, and the gardens, Rani felt like a cut-out doll pasted onto a glossy page.

"How you doing?" Dwayne leaned closer into the table, putting his elbows on the glass top.

"Hm? Oh. Okay." Rani nodded. "Okay."

"Yeah?" Dwayne reached out to touch her arm.

Rani stared at his fingers, at the darkness of his skin against her own. Darker than Justus'. At the trimmed fingernails, at the pale moons. Large hands. Made her arm look like a child's. Just the way Justus made her feel.

"I—" Rani wanted to blurt out about the letters. About the atmosphere in her house. But this wasn't the right place. The radio was blaring a heavy metal song and the guys were hooting and laughing as they moved up and down the length of the court. Instead, Rani shook her head and blinked. "Things are good."

"Hmm." Dwayne pursed his lips and then laughed. "He tell you he got the last two final offers?"

"What?" Rani felt her body freeze as she studied Dwayne's face.

The laughter vanished and his face slid into its serious mode. Rani didn't know another person who had such extreme facial expressions. "Shit. He didn't tell you yet? Coaches called him last night telling him he needed to make a decision. Kentucky and UNC."

"When?"

Justus appeared at the table. He had changed into his swimtrunks and had his backpack clutched in one hand and a waterbottle in the other. "Let's go." He nudged the chair Rani sat in.

"Y'all have fun." Dwayne tapped Rani's arm before withdrawing his hand. He stood and punched Justus in the arm before going back onto the court.

Rani and Justus drove with the windows down, the salt air sliding in and out. The afternoon was warm, not unbearable. Justus hung his arm out the window and leaned his head against the back window. The sunglasses covered his eyes, so Rani couldn't tell what he was looking at. She kept both hands on the steering wheel and focused on the road.

When is he gonna tell me? Enough about how school went. About the game. Freaking tell me. Why won't he tell me? Is he just gonna leave? Is that it? No notice. Why do I care? Gus helped me with those applications. Just because I got them in late doesn't mean I won't get in. Maybe I'll leave. You don't own him. He doesn't belong to me. Why am I so pissed? Why do I want to hit him? Kiss him. No.

"You're doing really well. Driving." Justus broke the wind-filled silence. "I mean it. You don't seem nervous or anything. Are you?"

"A little." Rani nodded.

"Really?"

Say it. Dammit. Say it. "Not about driving."

"Oh?" Justus lifted his head and pushed his sunglasses onto the top of his head.

"That just woke somebody up." Rani readjusted her hands on the steering wheel.

"You gonna fill me in?"



What does he want to hear? What do I want to hear? Where is he going? Which one is he gonna choose? You knew he was going to leave. You knew it. Why am I surprised? He doesn't belong to me. Fuck. Rani chewed on the inside of her cheeks.

"What're you thinking, Rain?"

"Just stuff."

"Thanks for the enlightenment."

"I'll tell you in a minute." Rani pulled into lot 7 and parked the truck. There were only a few other cars in the lot.

Once on the beach, Rani ran toward the water and let it swirl around her legs. Warm water. Cold sand. She squinted in the bright light and held her hands over her eyes like a visor. Justus came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her.

"You gonna tell me?"

"Soon." She wanted to lean into him, but she stood straight.

His arms let go and he turned. Rani scrunched her eyebrows together and turned to follow him. He had sat in the sand, leaning back on his elbows.

"What?" she asked.

"I'll wait."

"Stop it." She dropped to her knees. "Don't be like that."

"Me?" Justus shook his head. "Whatever."

"Stop it." Rani poked his arm, her fingers sliding down to his wrist to play with the rubberbands there.

"I found some letters today. George wrote them to my mom. They were in the desk with the keys to the truck. She didn't even open them. She didn't open them—" Rani stared out at the crashing water. She wondered how far she could swim. How quickly she would get tired.

"You okay?" Justus sat up, attempting to brush sand off his back.

"It just feels weird. Like I'm--it's scary. Different. I dunno. I felt guilty. Cause I haven't written to her, Justus. I haven't even gone to see her. But I'm afraid."

"I could go with you." Justus placed his hand on the small of her back, between her jeans and her tanktop. "I will, I mean."

"I don't know." Rani scooped a handful of sand and let it run out between her fingers. "I'm still scared. Those places are creepy. I hate hospitals."

They sat in silence. Rani's thoughts flew between visions of her mother, of Rosaline, of the hospital and the suspicious look of the nurses and doctors with their bazillion questions. She thought of Justus. Of Justus. Rani turned to look at him. At the angle of his jaw. At his bald head which he Bic'd during the season. Without thinking, her fingers rubbed the bump in her nose. And her mind raced.

"I love you," he whispered.

Rani's head swung to look at him. He didn't just say it. Not now. No. He didn't.

"I love you." He said it again.

Rani lowered her head, blinked hard and stared down the stretch of the beach. Umbrellas shaded blankets spread out in the sand and chairs with women sitting in them

reading books. Children dug into the sand with their shovels, and older women strolled along the water's edge.

"Why didn't you tell me you got final offers?" Rani croaked as her heart pounded.

"What?" Justus asked.

"Kentucky? UNC? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Rani. I don't. Shit. Did Dwayne tell you? Damn."

"Why?"

"I don't know where I'm going. What's wrong with Gainesville? Nothing. Nothing's wrong with it."

"But Kentucky? UNC? Justus you've been talking about those schools since we were little. And Josh is at Gainesville. You always got on him about that. For selling out. Not going to UConn. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It just wasn't important."

"Right. But telling me what you did today was? You had a half hour to tell me on the way over here."

"Is that what's bugging you? Why didn't you just ask me about it? Why are you playing these games?"

"What?" Rani stared at him.

"I fucking love you. I finally got the balls to tell you the other night and you ignored me. So, I tell you again. Granted it probably wasn't the best freaking timing, but I told you. And you can't even—"

"What do you want me to say? You want me to lie?"

“You have to lie? What the heck does that mean?”

“That’s not what I meant. Why are you—”

“I just want you to acknowledge how I feel. I want you to tell me how you feel. You have to ask me about ball. I always talk about ball, Rani. Always. What about you? How are you doing? It’s been like almost a month and you still won’t fucking tell me what happened. What she did to you. Why your mom got put in the hospital. You won’t talk about George. Fuck, the most I get from you is about Thomas. And if I’m lucky, something about your art. What the fuck is that?”

“Stop it.” Rani shouted at him.

“No. I always stop. I’m always holding back. I’m tired, Rani. I’m fucking tired.” Justus stood up and grabbed his bag. “Fuck it.”

“Why did you tell me now? Why did you have to wait and tell me when I know you’re leaving? Why did you wait?”

“What?” Justus turned back to her. “Because I’m leaving? I can’t love you because I’m leaving? What the hell does that mean?”

Rani cringed at his raised voice. Not here. Not at their place. She glanced down the beach, almost expecting people to be staring, but they were too far away to hear the argument. *I want to sink into the sand, bury myself. You moron.*

She heard Justus drop his bag, felt him crouch in front of her and grab her upper arms. But she didn’t look at him. Couldn’t look at him.

“Stop it,” he said. “Fucking stop it.”

“I—” She felt an emptiness fill her stomach, making her want to curl into a ball. Rani swallowed hard. “I’m sorry.”

Justus fell to his knees and pulled her head to his chest. His chest was warm, smooth. Rani could smell him underneath the sweat and chlorine. Knew if she kissed him, at the center of his breastbone, she would taste salt. Like the ocean.

“You have to start talking to me, Rain. I’m not leaving yet. Not until August. We’ve got like eight months to figure it out. Don’t make me leave now. Don’t.”

She lifted her head and stared at his face. At the stubble beginning to grown on his chin, on the side of his face. At his blue eyes. Blue eyes like his mother’s. Like the water. Like the sky. Like him. They were a part of him. One of the parts that began to comfort her. Something she looked for in the mass of faces at school or when she ran out of her house. Those eyes. Him. She placed her hands on his face. Small hands compared to his face, compared to him. A smile on her lips as she saw the puzzlement in his face. Rani leaned forward and kissed him, her eyes staring into his.

## Thomas

Daddy holds me by my arms and I fly through the air like an airplane. And I laugh and Daddy laughs. But I miss Momma. Daddy came back and Momma left. Rani says Momma is somewhere safe. But home is safe. That's what the man said. The one who likes me to draw pictures. But I never draw the right pictures. He wants me to draw Momma. I can't. Momma makes me sad. She left me. And before she left me she scared me. Momma colored herself in red and I was cold and I had to watch and she told me to shush, baby. To shush because she needed to listen to the voices. I wanted to hum, to put my ear against the toilet and keep flushing so all I could hear was the swooshing noise of the water, but Momma pulled me into the tub and wouldn't let me move.

Bobby said Momma is coo-coo. I wanted to bite him. To tell him to stop telling lies. But I didn't. Mrs. Lozak made him miss recess. I stuck my tongue at him when I got into line. Mrs. Lozak didn't see. Bobby tried to tattle without raising his hand. So he got in trouble again and had to write sentences too. I felt bad, but not really. Cause I got picked first to play kickball. Cause I can run fast and I can kick far. Justus showed me how to kick far. You got to run at the ball at an angle and whack it with the inside of your foot. If you kick it with your toe, it just goes up in the air really high. But if you use the inside of your foot, it goes really far. And the other team gets mad cause their guys have to run far and they don't get the ball in time and I make homeruns. Sometimes I mess up though. I still kick with my toe. *Sometimes.*

Thomas hopped around his bed as he tried to change his sheets. It made him embarrassed if Rani found his sheets wet. He tried to go potty before he got into bed, but it still didn't work. He'd wake up cold and wet and his pajamas would be smelly and twisted and then he'd have to change the sheets and hide them in the closet. Sometimes he hid them under the bed, but Rani looked there. Thomas had aimed the fan on the wet spot and had gone downstairs to color pictures of Daddy working at his desk. He had a computer now down there. Before, Thomas only saw computers at school and at Justus' house. But Daddy had a computer now and he got Thomas a game. An alphabet game. Because Thomas still couldn't read. Only little words. And his reading teacher told Daddy to get the game. Thomas wasn't supposed to be listening when they talked. He was supposed to be trying to spell words out of the letter magnets. But he couldn't. Because his reading teacher, Ms. Ellis, talked real nice to Daddy and touched his arm when she whispered to him. Thomas couldn't hear the whispers, but he heard the other things.

Now, the spot had dried and Thomas tried to pull the dinosaur sheets onto his bed. But the corners kept popping off. *Pop! Pop goes the weasel!* Because he couldn't tuck them under enough. This time he might have gotten it though. He tucked the sheet under real good and it had to stay now. When he tucked the final corner, the sheet stayed in place. Thomas glanced at the door. He could hear Daddy typing and Rani wasn't home. He pulled off his shoes and jumped onto his bed. He jumped up and down, trying to see how high he could tap the wall.

"Thomas?" Daddy called upstairs. "What's going on up there?"

Thomas stopped in midbounce and landed on the floor with a thud. "Nothing, Daddy."

"We have to leave in a little while so make sure you're dressed."

"Okay, Daddy," Thomas said.

One corner had come untucked so Thomas pulled it back under, his tongue slipping out of his mouth and tucked itself between his lips. Next, Thomas pulled the big sheet over his bed and the blanket. He watched Rani make his bed and he tried to do the corners like she did it, but his weren't as neat. But he was little and they looked okay. Not like Rani's corners, but good enough. Rani only made his bed sometimes now. She was too busy with her art. But he still got to watch her, to see her use the ink bottles and the fancy paints and the clay. Mr. Diatro got that stuff for her. And Daddy did too. And she looked like she was gonna cry, but she didn't. She didn't cry. She just smiled and got real quiet. And she didn't even forget to say thank you. Rani doesn't forget things like that. Not really. She did forget to give me a bath. So Daddy did instead. But she took me to the beach and I got some ice cream. Not where Justus is but at another shop. She said this shop was closer and that Justus wouldn't be at his shop anyway. I miss Justus. Things are different now. I get scared sometimes and I want to hide under my bed but it's dark and dusty there. I want to go to Mrs. Diatro or to Bekki because they cover me with warm blankets and let me eat cookies and drink cocoa or milk. And brownies too. They aren't different.

"Ready, Tommy?" George stood in Thomas' doorway.

"Hi, Daddy." Thomas pulled on his sneakers. "I'm ready."



“You need a sweatshirt. It’s still cool outside.” George strode across the room toward Thomas’ closet.

Thomas wanted to attach himself to his father’s legs, to tell him to stop, to tell him that he’d get the sweatshirt. Instead, Thomas ran out of the bedroom. He clumped down the stairs and outside onto the porch. It was cold. The sun was still rising and Thomas felt the cool air like his body was wet and the breeze was blowing on him. Like at the beach. But he wasn’t wet and he had on clothes and it had been too cold to go to the beach. At least to go into the water. Rani still took him and they looked for sharks’ teeth. Rani showed him how to find them. They were the shiny black dots. There were black shells in the sand, but they weren’t shiny like the sharks teeth. Thomas had gotten good at finding them. Lots of times he found more than Rani. But she stared a lot at the water. Sometimes he stopped to stare too. He’d watch her out of the corner of his eye and then he would stare at the water. He wondered if there were dolphins or a boat or a rainbow or birds. But most times there was nothing. Just Rani stared. Sometimes Thomas liked to stare too. But then he wouldn’t find more sharks’ teeth than her. And he wanted to fill the spaghetti jar with them. Right now it was half full. Rani gave him her sharks’ teeth. Thomas liked to shake the jar and listen to the sharks’ teeth clatter inside of the glass.

On the porch, Thomas slunk down to the bottom step and sat down. His bottom got wet from the step. Thomas liked shuffling through the grass in the morning cause it made his shoes wet. But his teacher yelled at him if she saw him and then his feet would be cold until recess and then they’d dry in the afternoon sun. There wasn’t any grass in front of his house anymore. Momma dug it all up. Except little clumps near the fence. Daddy said they were

going to fix it, but Thomas didn't know how. Now, the sandy dirt looked wet and cold. Thomas wanted to go inside. But if Daddy opened the closet then he found the sheets and he would be coming downstairs and he might yell at Thomas. Rani didn't yell, but she got quiet and reminded Thomas to use the potty before he went to bed and she wouldn't let him drink any water after dinner, even if he got really thirsty. But when he brushed his teeth, he'd take long gulps from the faucet when Rani wasn't looking. He'd gotten thirsty. It wasn't his fault. But Daddy didn't know he wet the bed. Thomas didn't want him to know. So instead, Thomas sat on the porch, getting colder and waiting for Daddy to come onto the porch.

"Thomas?" George opened the front door. "You out here?"

Thomas stuck his fingers in his mouth, rolling his tongue around his fingernails and knuckles. He turned to look at his father, his cheeks bright red.

"I've been looking for you." George came onto the porch, a black bag slung over his shoulder and a sweatshirt in his hand.

Thomas could smell his father. He smelled spicy but sweet. Like perfume.

"Take your fingers out of your mouth so you can put this on." George held out the sweatshirt, stretching the neck hole so Thomas could slide his head through.

With the sweatshirt on, Thomas plucked his fingers back into his mouth and followed his father to his car. Inside it smelled like cinnamon and leather. It was a new car. Thomas' granddaddy brought it to their house. George helped Thomas buckle his seatbelt and then closed the door. In this car, Thomas couldn't open the backdoors. Justus said that's how police cars are.

"You okay, Tommy?" George turned to look at Thomas.

Thomas nodded, still sucking on his fingers. He waited. Daddy had to say something. Right? But he wasn't. He drove to the bagel shop and got a lot of bagels and cream cheese and juice. Thomas didn't have to go to school because it was closed. So he drove around with Daddy. There were crayons and books and Power Rangers in the backseat of the car for Thomas to play with, but this morning, those things didn't interest him. Justus said wetting the bed wasn't bad. That he'd grow out of it. But Thomas kept doing it and he felt like a baby. Would Daddy make him wear a diaper? He wanted to be a big boy. Not a baby.

At work, Thomas followed his father past the desks and the big print machine which made lots of noise and he waved through the window at his granddaddy who was talking on the telephone and then he sat at the empty desk across from his father's. Daddy put the bag of bagels in front of Thomas. He felt the warm brown bag and his tummy gurgled.

"So, kiddo. What do you want to do today?"

Thomas watched Daddy sit at his desk and shuffle through papers. He clicked on his computer and moved the mouse. Thomas knew how to use computers. There was a teacher who came to school and showed his class. He was good at it.

"I wanna see Momma," Thomas said.

He watched his father's face. The eyebrows raising, his cheeks turning colors and then a smile and a frown and a smile again.

"Oh—I—Thomas . . . well—"

"Can I see Momma? Please?" Thomas asked. He had never asked before. But he missed her. Missed the way she smelled and the way she would sing to him and let him do silly things with her.

"I don't know, Tommy." George said.

"But why? Does Momma not want to see me?"

"Oh, no." George came around the desks and knelt by Thomas' chair. "No, kiddo. Momma wants to see you. She misses you. It's just. The doctors. Well, the doctors want Momma to rest. They—"

"She won't hurt me, Daddy. Momma never hurt me."

"I know, baby. I know. It's just—"

"I don't like those doctors."

"Thomas, they're just trying to help Momma."

"Can't we help her? Can't we?"

"Sometimes it's too hard, Thomas. Daddy couldn't do it by himself."

"Did you send Momma away? Did you send Rosaline away?"

Thomas again watched his father's face. But this time, George turned away from him and laughed. Not a full belly laugh but a little chuckle. Like the scary guy did sometimes on the cartoons.

"I wouldn't send them away, Thomas."

"But they left. You came back and they left."

"I never went anywhere."

"Yes you did. You stopped playing with me and you didn't read to me. And Rani took care of me. She did. And sometimes Rosaline did. But Rani did more. And now Rani is going away too. Do they not like you, Daddy? Why do you make them go away? Please

don't make Rani go away." Thomas felt his lips quiver and he jammed his fingers into his mouth to stop them. Babies cried.

"Oh my God." George sat on the edge of the desk and didn't face Thomas. "Oh my God," he said again.

"Daddy?" Thomas mumbled over his fingers. "Are you sad, Daddy?"

George turned and picked Thomas out of the chair. He held him to his chest and stroked his hair. Thomas remembered he forgot to brush it. He had licks in his hair. That's what Rani said. Cows licked his hair. She was silly. Where was Rani? He missed her. He missed Momma. Sometimes, he even missed Rosaline. But Thomas had never missed Daddy. Rani told him stories about Daddy. How Daddy used to read to him and play with him. But Thomas didn't remember. He said those things to Daddy, but he didn't know. Sometimes he tried hard to remember. Just like he tried hard to remember Rosaline. Her hair and the way it stuck around her head like Momma's except different colors. Like the pipe cleaners they twisted and turned in art class.

"I love you," George said.

Thomas pulled his fingers out of his mouth and wiped them on his sweatshirt. "I love you, Daddy." Thomas snuggled into the warmth of his father and closed his eyes. He was hungry, but he was tired too. And it felt safe there, next to his father. Warm and safe and happy.

## Old Man Diatro

Gus kept focusing on George, on all of the Hewitts. Instead, he knew he needed to move forward. To let go of the past. But how could he after spending so much of his life there? To just let go would free up so much of his time—would force him to create a new self of sorts. And, really, Gus didn't know yet. Didn't know if he could let go of it all. Of Judge, Beth-Anne, of Dori. What if he let go and the Hewitts weren't okay? Something could happen and he wouldn't be there. Gus felt his chest tighten. Was he gonna have another panic attack? My God. He fought with Eleanor the other weekend because he wouldn't go away. She wanted to go to the Everglades, but Gus wouldn't do it. Told her later. He knew he needed to go. Eleanor went to the Everglades often. She loved the marsh, the swamp, tree limbs fluttering with Spanish moss. They had to go. Gus shook his head at himself and sighed. Crazy old man, he thought. Just crazy.

He folded the lawn chair and set it against the porch railing. He hadn't used his lasso since Thomas. Instead, he sat on the porch with his hat pulled low and his hands folded in his lap. Sometimes he fell asleep like that and the children had no idea. They still shrieked and scurried by the house, laughing at one another or teasing as the case may be. After Thomas—no, after Eleanor's reaction to Thomas, Gus had to stop. Couldn't keep doing it. The fun, the teasing, had left. Instead, the game seemed cruel—and he felt like an evil old man. So now, he sat in silence, listening to the afternoon, to the children's voices. How nice it would be to be a child again. His own childhood was spent up north, in the snow. Sledding and

snowball fights with his brothers and sisters. But Gus didn't care for the cold anymore.

Loved the heat, as if it gave his bones energy.

The screen door closed behind him and Gus put his hat in the closet. For some reason, he couldn't get out of his thoughts today. They clung to his insides, fighting to get to the front of the line. Gus didn't even know which thought he would choose to ruminate over—if he could choose. The thoughts just hung, misty, elusive. Did he need to make a choice? Was he having an old man's crisis? Why the past?

Gus pulled *Paradise Lost* out of his pant's pocket and thumbed through the worn pages. He'd taught the book countless times. To students with blank faces, to girls who put on their make-up in the back of the class, to the boy who stared at the clock—to those faces that stared at him with rapt attention. It used to be enough that he reached at least a few. But as he got older, instead of getting softer and letting go, Gus began to take it personally. Students didn't care anymore and no matter what approach he tried, Gus couldn't reach them. Instead of appreciating the few who he did reach, he started to become bitter. Angry at all of those students he missed. *Get out of your thoughts, old man.*

Eleanor was reading in the den. He sat on the couch next to her and then he leaned over and nestled his head into her lap like a small child would do.

"What're you doing you silly old man?" Eleanor peered over her reading glasses and closed her book.

"Eleanor—" Gus blinked his eyes and stared out the bay window. He snuggled closer to his wife and sighed.

She stroked his hair with one hand and rubbed his back with the other.

“They’ll be fine, Gus. It’ll take some time. You’ll be okay too. You’ll see. You just have to find something to do. Mike’s been wanting to take you sailing. Spend some time with your boys. Or with Carol. They keep asking about you. They’re only in Georgia. We could go up there.” Eleanor tugged on his ear and continued to stroke his hair. “It’s almost Christmas. You can talk to them about it then.”

“What will they be doing for Christmas?” Gus asked. He imagined them treating it like any other day, just like they’d done with Thanksgiving. The day had come and gone without a big meal, without any meal. In the evening, Rani and Thomas finally came over. Rani wouldn’t eat anything, but Thomas had some turkey and pumpkin pie. Christmas couldn’t be the same. They needed a tree. Presents. God, they needed to be children.

“Oh, Gus.”

“Eleanor. They’ll be—”

“We’ll invite them over. The children won’t mind. Will that calm you down? I’m sure they’d accept the invitation. And we could invite George’s father too.”

“I love you,” Gus hugged her knees and nestled his head into her lap. “I love you so much.”



## Rani

The hallway echoed with her steps even though she kept trying to walk in silence. The gleaming white and the metallic smell of chemical cleaners made Rani want to run. Run out of the hospital and back into the cool, breezy day. Wind swept off the water had kept the whole week cool. Rani loved the cool weather, loved wearing layers and making hot chocolate with Thomas. But inside the hospital, there was only stale air and a sense of not breathing.

Justus kept offering to go with her. The idea was nice, but it'd be too much. Or maybe I think it'd be too much for him. He'd take one look at the possibilities and go running. Maybe that would've been easier though. To get him out of here. Out of my life. Stop the hurting that's gonna come. He's going to school. But maybe I am too. Maybe. *It hurts too much to hope.*

She stood in front of a window, blocking out the metal bars and staring at the trees, at the Spanish moss resting on the limbs and blowing in the wind. Rani rested her head against the cool glass and took a small breath. A big breath might have made her heave. A stale smoky smell began to grow in intensity as she neared the ward.

Go, you chicken. Go. She's your mother. She at least deserves that. It'd been two weeks. Don't you miss her? No. I miss what she used to be. I miss the woman who read *The Hobbit*, *The Cay*, *Bridge to Tarabithia*. The one who would tickle my back with her fingernails. I want that woman back. But she's been gone for so long. Thomas never saw that woman. Only in breaths. Momentary pauses in his life. A hint of normalcy that never became anything. But I hoped. For so long. That Momma would come back, that she would

start to laugh and shrug her shoulders. Say she got tired swimming in her own mind. But she never laughed. She never got tired.

“May I help you, Miss?”

Rani jerked her head at the sound of the attendant’s voice. “Um, no. Wait, yes. Please. My mother. Dori Hewitt. I’m looking for her.”

“Come to the nurse’s station and I’ll help you look for her.”

Rani followed the young man, wishing to obtain his ease, his comfort in this building. It’d be impossible though. She never felt that comfortable. Did she? The studio maybe. Is that why she loved art so much? Was there ever that comfort with Justus? When they were just friends there had been. Before the idea of pushing past that line. And now the comfort hardly existed. Fuck.

“Here we go. Hey, Mary. We’re looking for Dori Hewitt.” The attendant spoke to the nurse.

The nurse scanned the computer screen sitting on her desk. Rani stared at the pictures surrounding the woman. Pictures of her family, of a holiday vacation. A small Christmas tree stood on the counter. Perched like a soldier waiting for decorations.

“She’s in the sun room.”

“Thanks, Mary.” The attendant jerked his head toward some double doors and waited for Rani to follow him.

He slipped his plastic key into the door to open it. Rani followed him, her mind still stuck on the Christmas tree. It didn’t feel like Christmas was only a few days away. She had completely forgotten December had rolled around. She needed to fix her portfolio. The show

had gone well, but she'd rushed a few pieces and wanted to touch them up during break. Rani tried to remember today's date, but the answer eluded her. She wrapped her arms around her body as she followed the attendant into the sun room. People sat in various places or stood as was the case for several people by the windows. Wheel chairs, couches, walkers, cushioned chairs. Rani's eyes scanned the room for her mother. For long blonde hair.

The attendant had walked to another attendant and they both scanned the room. Young men. Good-looking. But Rani couldn't get past their youth. Young twenties. How could they work here? She'd only imagined older people. Imagined the movies. The other attendant pointed and Rani followed his finger. A figure sat in the corner in a ball. Rani's brow crinkled. The person's hair was shaved, shorter than Rani's. Yet, Rani moved toward the figure. She watched the other people sitting still or watching television or drawing pictures with fat crayons Thomas grew out of when he was three. Some of the patients talked to the attendants. Or they stared out windows, at the walls. She stopped a good distance away from the figure in the corner and sat on the floor.

The figure had her back turned to Rani, but had tensed at the sound of her movements. Rani played with her shoelaces and waited. Why did she do this? What would this accomplish? Inside, did she hope some miracle would occur? That her mother would see her and suddenly snap out of it? Was hope kicking her in the gut again? Again. Rani sighed and began to fiddle with her other shoe.

Rani glanced up and noticed the figure had turned, had begun to stare at her. Those eyes registered somewhere deep and Rani knew for certain she was staring at her mother.

"Hey, momma," Rani whispered.

Dori shifted and rocked, alternating taps against the wall and the floor. Soft taps. Comforting taps. Rani waited. Please say something. Say something to me.

“Momma,” Dori said.

Rani wanted to hug her mother. To run from the building and scream. Was her mother really gone? Had she finally snapped all connections to reality? Was it possible to become that crazy? But they didn’t call her crazy or schizo or anything like that. Technical terms Rani couldn’t remember. Nicer words, but vague. Complex. Something you couldn’t define, just like her mother’s breakdown.

“They have flowers in the courtyard. I wish I could go to the courtyard. I want to grow my own flowers. I never had flowers. But I had orange trees. Big orange trees. And I would climb in them and get oranges and I would eat them and my chin and hands would get sticky.” Dori talked in long breaths and continued to rock-tap herself.

As she stared at Dori, at the walls, Rani tried to piece together Dori’s ramblings. But while she tried to piece one scenario, Dori created another and continued moving ahead. Rani’s mind hurt, her emotions hurt. Was this person really her mother? Would she never come back or was this it? Was it impossible to find the right medication? The cause? Would it happen to her? To Thomas? Rani chewed on her fingernails and kept taking shy glances of her mother.

“They won’t let me wear my skirts. My pretty skirts that float when I walk and they have pretty flowers on them and sometimes little bells. They took them away from me. I wasn’t good. So I have to wear this.” Dori picked at her green scrubs.

Rani thought she looked like a medic. She studied the scoop of the neck, the elastic pants, the soft slip on shoes. In reality, momma would've died before she wore anything like those clothes. She would've screamed at the people. Maybe she already had. Was she being punished? Or was she too dangerous? Shiny white scars, bumpy roadways, careened down Dori's arms. Rani took glimpses and then studied and then looked away and gnawed further down the length of her nail. She'd have raw nubs for fingers by the time she left. But for some reason, she couldn't leave. Not just yet. Was it guilt? George wrote her all those letters. He must've come and visited her. Rani had reopened the desk drawer and fingered the letters many times but she still couldn't bring herself to read them. Maybe they were apologies, explaining why he couldn't come and visit. Too painful. Blah, blah, blah. Fuck. She wanted to get up and go to a window, go somewhere she could take a deep breath.

The barren room gleamed in sterility. No sharp objects, nothing hanging on the walls. A television placed inside a safety box with no sharp corners. Was this like prison? Or worse than prison? Would her mother have to live here forever? Rani heard George and Mr. Diatro talking about a facility outside of town. Closer to Orlando, to the specialists. But what specialists? Did they know? Did they have any idea what was happening to Dori? Any?

"I miss my Georgey," Dori said. "He used to brush my hair and braid it for me. I had pretty hair. I did. You don't have pretty hair. It's short like mine. Did you ever have pretty hair? Mine was pretty. And Georgey brushed it and he pulled his fingers through it and he braided it I could close my eyes and I fell asleep but not really cause I don't like to sleep. Scary." Dori's voice began to trail off and Rani continued to sit next to her in silence.

Would momma recognize George if he came and sat next to her? Would she know Georgey came to tell her he loved her and he missed her and he was taking care of Thomas? Would she know? Dori shifted and rocked and turned her back to Rani. She rested her head against the wall and seemed to fall asleep. Standing, Rani backed away from her mother. She turned and noticed the young attendant watching her. Instead of returning contact or smiling, Rani lowered her eyes and walked toward the door she came through.

“Wait,” the attendant called to her. “I have to open the door. They’re locked.”

Rani felt the blush rise to her cheeks and wished she had her hair to block her face.

“Right. Thanks. Sorry about that,” she mumbled.

“You okay?” he asked.

Something tugged inside Rani’s chest and she lifted her eyes to the man in front of her. He had green eyes. She hadn’t noticed that before. And even they showed a comfort, an ease. How did he do that? How could a person be so comfortable inside his own skin?

“I think so. I think I’m all right. Is she? My mother?” Rani nodded toward Dori who continued sitting still in the corner.

“We try to keep her as comfortable as possible. Some days are better than others. But she hasn’t tried hurting herself in a while. But we still can’t keep her out of a delusional state.”

“Will you ever?” Rani felt hope bite inside of her and she wanted to kick it down. Falseness.

“I’m not a doctor. I can’t tell you that.”

“Right.” Rani again blushed and looked away. “Thank you. For taking care of my mother.”

The attendant nodded and opened the door for Rani. She watched the red light switch to green as the key registered and the doors unlocked.

“Thank you.” She lifted her head this time and smiled at the man. Ease. She needed to get used to her own skin.

Rani sat in the pickup and stared at the crashing water. The waves rolled in on the deserted beach. A few stray fishermen lined the shore. Otherwise, the sand shifted in the wind and erased all footprints and tire tracks. It was too cold to get out and walk without a jacket and Rani hadn't thought to bring hers. Instead, she sat in the warmth of the truck and stared at the gradual arc of the horizon, at the darkening sky and at the reflection of the setting sun in the rearview mirror. She'd never been to the west coast of the state, never saw the sun set over the water. Plenty of times she watched the sun rise, in hot dark pink, to lighter shades and then shifting to oranges and yellows. How wonderful it'd be to watch the sun set over the water, being swallowed by the ocean.

A flock of pelicans crossed in front of the truck and Rani guessed odd as she counted them. Even. Of course. A simple game she played with Thomas. Odd or even. If you guessed right, it meant good luck. She took another deep breath and leaned over the steering wheel, her eyes sliding across the crashing waves and beyond to the choppy surface of the water. There weren't any porpoises, no surfboards, no shrimp boats in the distance. Instead, she pretended the hotel and condos didn't exist behind her and stared deeper into the water.

At the darkness. Listening to the crashing pulse and waiting for the pause. Consistent. The darkness crept in around the truck and Rani leaned her head against the window. She needed to get home. To Thomas. To George. How long had she been sitting in the truck? Rani didn't have a watch and there wasn't one in the truck. Would George be mad? Shit. The truck shifted into reverse and Rani bounced over the sand and toward the street, her mind still floating in the waves and the dark sky.

It was impossible. She couldn't go into the house. Not now. Not when images of her mother shifted into focus. A mother who didn't live in their house. A mother who didn't act like a mother. Who wasn't a mother. The truck idled while Rani stared into the kitchen window. Thomas and George sat at the table, Thomas sitting on his knees and laughing. Rani pulled away from the curb and headed toward Justus'.

She stood in the front yard and heard the echo of the basketball. The grass wrapped around her bare feet in wetness. Rani crossed her arms over her chest to keep warm and tiptoed toward the basketball court. A chill shook Rani's spine as she shifted in the grass and waited for the right moment. Justus went for a hook shot and missed. He grabbed the ball and went to throw it, but caught it in his other hand as he saw Rani standing there.

"Hey," he said.

"Sorry. Bad timing?"

"No." He glanced at the ball in his hands. "Rough night . . . haven't seen you in a while."

"Sorry. My portfolio." Rani wrapped her arms tighter around her body.



“Wanna go inside?”

“No. I--um--just wanted to see you for a minute.”

“Yeah?”

Justus set the ball down in the middle of the court and came toward her. Inside, Rani felt herself stiffen, doubt her decision, wonder if she should say goodnight and go home. She needed to call George at least. Go see Thomas. She'd barely seen him the last few weeks.

“Your parents home?”

“Nah. Down at the shop. Had to make stock for the weekend. Won't be home until late.”

“I, um, went to see my mom today.”

“Rain. I would've--”

“I needed to go by myself. I just wanted to see her.”

Justus wrapped his arms around her and for once, she didn't want to pull away. His body felt warm, smelled of sweat and cologne, created a shelter. Rani tucked her head against his chest and breathed.

“She didn't recognize me. God--she's so gone. So--she's not my mother. I don't know what happened. I feel so stupid.” Rani nuzzled her head harder into his chest and Justus' hand rubbed her neck, warm and comforting. “I thought it'd make a difference. You know? Like if I saw her, she'd recognize me. Come out of it or something. But she--it didn't matter. Nothing happened. Talked to me like I was nobody and then she just turned around and--” Rani pulled her arms from around her own body and wrapped them around

Justus'. "—blocked me right out. Like I didn't matter. I don't matter. Nothing matters to her anymore. I'm so--I don't know . . . I—"

She pulled Justus closer to her body, felt the length of him against her. The comfort. His consistency. Automatic sprinklers kicked on and sprayed their legs. Rani jumped, laughing, and moved out of dodge.

"Come inside." Justus pulled her hand and headed toward the house.

Rani followed into the warmth of the house, into the smell of vanilla and crushed flowers.

"I need to use the phone." She sat at the kitchen counter and dialed, waiting for George to pick up, but he didn't. Bath night. Must've been in the bathroom with Thomas. On the machine, she apologized, told him where she was, she'd be home late.

"Hungry?" Justus held out a pot of pasta. "I'm starving."

She watched him spoon pasta onto plates, scooping sauce and vegetables on top of each. Justus put one into the microwave and turned toward her. The silence spread between them and Rani shifted her weight from one foot to the other before sitting on a breakfast stool.

"Sorry I haven't called. The—"

"Your portfolio. I know. How's it going?" he asked.

"It's true, Justus. It takes a lot of work. There's so much competition for those spots and I—"

"Don't get defensive. I've been playing ball for twelve years. I know."

"Then why—"

"Because I don't let it get in the way."

"What?"

"I don't let it—nevermind." The microwave beeped and Justus exchanged one plate for the other.

"Don't nevermind. What?"

"You never nevermind."

"What? Do you need me to leave?" Rani fingered her hair and pulled at stray wisps.

"No. I—nevermind. Really. Guess I'm just a little pissed. It would've been nice if you called me. Let me know, at least, how things were going. You know?"

Rani twirled pasta around her fork and then set it down. "I'm sorry. I know." She put her head in her hands and stared at the plate. At the pattern of green leaves swirling around the edges, of the pasta and sauce mixed together, the colors and the smell. Her stomach tightened and gurgled and twirled in a nauseous leap. She couldn't remember if she ate today or not. Did it matter?

He moved behind her and rubbed her shoulders. "You need to eat. I'm sorry. Just miss you. That's all. Honest."

"I'm so sorry. I'm—about everything. I should've . . . God. I don't mean to—to shut you out. I don't mean to do it, Justus. It's just like—this thing, this feeling inside and I just want—I can't—"

Justus pulled her shoulders back and kissed her on the mouth. Soft, salty lips. She felt herself blush. As he kissed her again, she began pulling away and taunting him.

"Forget it." Justus went and got his plate out of the microwave.

“What do you mean?” Rani felt herself blushing again.

“You won’t even kiss me.” He slammed the plate onto the counter. “What the fuck is that? Do you even want to kiss me?”

Her heart flipped and slammed against her chest. Could she have a heart attack? Was it freaking possible? “No. I mean yes. I just—”

“What?” he asked.

“I’m distracted. My fucking mom—”

“She won’t be an excuse forever. You know that? We made a decision to push beyond friendship. Do you want to take it back? Because it used to be different, Rain. You’d call me and talk to me. Or—or you’d show up after I played ball and we’d talk for hours. And—fuck, you don’t do any of that anymore. It’s like changing the status of our relationship freaked you out or something.”

“It’s different—”

“You’re the one who’s making it different.” He swirled pasta around his fork and took a bite. After he swallowed, he glanced at her, rubbed his hand over his face. “Do you love me?”

“Yes.” Rani nodded and thought about her answer. She loved him too much, maybe. And now if he was leaving. God, he needed to know. Needed to know how much she loved him. “I’ll kiss you,” she whispered.

“What?” he asked.

“Are you laughing at me? . . . I said I’d kiss you.”

“Oh yeah? Prove it.”

“What?” This couldn’t be happening. This wasn’t supposed to happen. She came here—why did she come here? She didn’t want him to say anything. What did she want though? Consistency? Comfort. Fuck. Think. He’s so fucking beautiful. Rani’s eyes crossed his face, the scar near his temple, almost the swirl of the letter ‘s.’

“Prove it.” Justus leaned against the counter and smiled.

He’s taunting me, she thought. Freaking taunting me. I don’t need this shit. I can kiss him. I freaking want to. Why don’t I? Why am I so afraid? Fuck. Just do it. Move. Blow his freaking mind. He won’t expect it. Prove him wrong. Come on. Rani moved around the breakfast bar and pushed herself up onto the counter. She sat across from him and swung her legs.

“You afraid?” she asked.

“Me?” Justus laughed and crossed the kitchen, wedging himself between her legs.

“Prove it,” he whispered.

Rani put a hand on either side of his face and pulled him close. She kissed his nose. His cheeks. His eyebrows. A groan escaped from him and then a smile.

“I’m teasing, aren’t I?” Rani laughed and then kissed his lips. Once. Twice. And again. “Your parents aren’t coming home anytime soon, right?”

“Rain—” Justus pulled away and studied her face.

He already knows my face so well. Why does he continue to look? Stop doubting. Stop thinking. Just do what you want. She kissed him again.

“Are you afraid?” she asked.

“No—I—”

“Prove it,” she said.

Justus laughed as he scooped her off the counter like a child. Like the way she carried Thomas upstairs when he fell asleep or when he wanted to cuddle. But Thomas wasn't here and she didn't need to think about it. Think about now. About Justus. About you. No. Don't think. Just feel.

## Justus

The sound of squeaking shoes, dribbling balls, and shouting voices slipped out the doors of the gym as Justus entered. He bent down to the water fountain and took a short drink. His gym bag tapped his leg as he walked toward the bleachers and dropped down on the worn wood. A group of guys were playing a full-court game and two guys were sitting on the edges waiting. Justus unsnapped the sides of his pants and pulled them off. He shuffled through his bag, looking for thicker socks. Dwayne caught a pass at the top of the key and drove in to win the game.

“Nice shot,” Justus pulled on the thick socks and slipped his feet into his basketball shoes.

“You’re late. We’ve been in here over a half hour,” Dwayne said.

Dwayne sat on the floor in front of Justus and laid back to stretch his hamstring.

“I was busy,” Justus didn’t look up, but studied his shoes as he tied them.

“Hm,” Dwayne said. “Doing what?”

“Just busy,” Justus said.

He grabbed his ball and walked toward a side goal. Dwayne would follow him if he wasn’t already behind him.

“Doing what?” Dwayne rebounded and passed the ball back to Justus.

“Shit, just busy.”

“Rani come over?”

“How do you know everything?” Justus asked.

“Good guess, that’s all.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Justus went to shoot the ball but stopped. Dwayne had looked away, put his hands on his hips. As Dwayne looked back at him, Justus wondered, was it disgust, on his face.

“You told her to come over.” Justus dropped the ball. “Jesus.”

“You’re an asshole,” Dwayne said. “A fucking asshole.”

“Me?”

“Have a little faith in the girl. Maybe she just needed you.” Dwayne walked toward the center of the court for the start of the game. He looked over his shoulder toward Justus, “Asshole.”

Justus kicked his basketball toward the doors and slammed his open palm into the stacked bleachers. Why couldn’t he believe Dwayne? Because he was always talking to Rani, that’s why. Every time he found her in the studio or at her locker, Dwayne was close by. Jealousy? Not jealous of their time together. Jealous that she talked to him. That she let him know what was going on in her mind. That she was afraid or insecure or tired or sometimes even happy. But Justus didn’t get told those things. Not anymore. Not since he had tried to push the relationship past just being friends. Instead, he overheard things or was told second-hand. Only through pulling teeth, by forcing the issue, was he told anything. Why wouldn’t she talk to him? Justus retrieved his ball and practiced dribbling drills on the sidelines. Rani. The way she looked. The moonlight cut across the sheets, the middle of her body, making her stomach glow. She fell asleep, curled her back into his stomach, sighed as she slept. He watched her for a long time, until his own eyes grew heavy. But when he woke up in the



middle of the night, she wasn't there. Instead, she stood by the window, dressed in his T-shirt.

"Come to bed, Rain," he said.

"I have to go home." She tapped the glass with her fingertips.

"George knows where you are."

"Thomas," she whispered

"He's asleep. Come here," Justus patted the bed.

"No."

Rani pulled on her jeans, tugged off his shirt without hiding her body. Her slim body, small rounded breasts. He wanted to hold her again, to feel her under him. But she pulled on her own shirt and searched for her car keys.

"They're over on the desk." Justus sat up and watched her. "You're just leaving?"

"I have to."

"No you don't."

"Justus don't start."

"What? Me? What the fuck?" Her threw off the covers and pulled on his shorts.

"What the fuck happened? Did I miss something?"

"No. Nevermind. Just forget it."

"Forget what? That you came over here and we slept together. We just slept together when you barely let me kiss you. Is that what I'm supposed to forget? Or the fact that you don't tell me shit. Is that it? That I have no idea what's going on inside your head and it's

killing me? Do you care about that? Does that bother you in the slightest? That you don't fucking talk to me?"

Rani stared at him, frozen for a moment at the foot of his bed. He sat and stared back, his elbows resting on his knees.

"Sorry you feel that way."

She closed the door behind her. What the fuck? Sorry he felt that way? Fuck her. She never talked to him. He tried to comfort her and that was wrong. Tried to talk to her and that was wrong. He was too pushy, too comforting. What was the right thing to do? What did Dwayne do? Fuck. Justus ran after her. Rani was already out on the basketball court. The pavement was cold against his bare feet and he could see their breath between them.

"Will you stop?" Justus grabbed her arm and turned her toward him. "Please. Don't leave. Please, Rain."

"I'll call you later." Rani pulled her arm away from him. "I have to go."

"What the fuck?" Justus punched his fist into his open palm and turned away from her. "Don't fucking bother," he muttered.

Now, as he dribbled the ball inside of the gym, he couldn't get her out of his mind. He wanted to follow her, to kiss her, to hold her. To tell her he wanted to understand, he wanted to help her feel the things she wouldn't let herself feel. Not just things about him, toward him. But things about her family, about her art. The insecurities. Justus dribbled the ball through his legs, around his body. He crouched lower and lower, continuing with the ball.

Justus and Dwayne were two out of the three high schoolers who'd been invited to play in the college gym. Sometimes they'd practice with the team, but the most fun was when they played with a group of guys who got together twice during the week and once on the weekends. This was the last time they'd get together until after Christmas break. Justus loved playing in the small college gym. The guys worked hard, pushed themselves beyond their abilities to try and win. There was an obvious leader of the group, a guy who kept quiet, who focused on the ball and who would show aggression only when his teammates started slacking. Justus loved playing with the guy, Marx. Because he made the game fun, but he kept it serious at the same time. He'd found the balance, one of the most important aspects of the game.

"Justus, you're up," Dwayne hollered.

Justus rolled his ball toward the opposite side of the gym and walked toward the center of the court. He wiped the bottom of each shoe and jumped a few times.

"Who I got?" he asked.

"Me," Dwayne smiled.

It was hard to play Dwayne. They knew each others moves, knew what to expect. It forced them to play harder, to become creative, to work on deception. But Justus was pissed. So was Dwayne, probably. The game would be even harder. Fouling, which they did to one another without mercy. Trash talking, which they did in hushed whispers during their high school games, would take on a whole new meaning in this arena. And trying to block one another's shots. Justus crouched down, waiting for the ball to be tossed. Dwayne stood next to him, shoving him as the ball got tapped by someone's hand.

Justus tried to get Rani out of his thoughts, but as he began to sweat, he noticed the smell of her lingering on his skin, on his arms. Dwayne shoved him under the basket, drawing Justus' attention back to the game.

"Come on, Justus. Get in the game." Marx hollered at him from across court.

Justus jerked his head and ran down the court after the ball. He felt himself beginning to slip into his mode, into the feeling of the game without any distractions. The ease in which he watched the shoulders of the guys around him, could tell which way they were gonna move, knew the ones who had good fakes, the ones who would never take a shot, the ones who could only dribble with their right hand. Even after all the years he'd been playing, the amount of conversation on the court surprised him. Watching the games one would never know. They could only guess at the trash talking, at the communication taking place. But Justus had learned to block this noise out as well. His focus became on the ball, on the hoops, on the movements of the other players. Muscles began to kick in, breathing became labored, pushing him harder, one more step, one more pass, one more shot. One more. The actions on the court became blurred and Justus pushed himself. Harder and harder. The timelessness, the freedom slipped into place and only the court existed.

"Where'd you go, man?" Dwayne shoved his forearm into Justus's back. "Huh? Pussy. Where'd you go? Don't think I'm gonna let you slip into your game. I'll fuck with you man. Fuck with you." Dwayne shoved him again, holding his forearm in the small of Justus's back.

"Fuck you," Justus pushed back, dribbling and trying to make his way inside the key.

Dwayne shoved harder. "Nah, that's all you got. All you got, bitch? That ain't gonna work. Come on, pussy. Your girls gotta bigger dick than you."

Justus shoved harder, slipping his elbow back. A small foul he knew Dwayne wouldn't call. At the same time, though, he knew it was a small foul that would just give Dwayne fuel.

"You dirty fucker," Dwayne mumbled.

With a hook shot, Justus turned and shook his finger at Dwayne, a smile creasing his face. He felt guys tapping him, cheering him on. Back on defense, Justus studied Dwayne, the way he moved, his face blank. Dwayne was fast, faster than Justus. But sometimes he got clumsy, got too showy. Other players tried to set a post, but Justus slipped around them and stood in front of Dwayne, swatting at the ball and getting in his face.

"Don't bring her out here man. Don't fucking bring her out here." Dwayne turned his back to Justus and shoved into him. "It'll fuck you up. It'll fuck us up." Dwayne shoved harder and cut right, passing the ball to his teammate who got an easy lay-up.

Justus peeled off his shirt and wiped his face with it. He loved the way his body dripped, the way the gym absorbed the heat, the sweat, the sounds of the game. During the summer months, they would prop the doors open and aim huge floor fans toward the court not to cool the air which was impossible, but to dry the floor from their sweat. Even in the winter, when the temperatures dropped into the fifties on a consistent basis, sometimes even into the forties and thirties, their bodies slipped off one another. Shoes squeaked across the floor, and the ball exchanged hands, fell through hoops, bounced off the boards, and made its way up and down the court, a group of sweaty guys following it. The game ended, Justus'

team winning. He pushed out of the gym and bent at the water fountain. Taking a mouthful, he spit it back into the basin. Marx leaned against the wall beside the fountain. As Justus drank, he studied Marx's argyle socks.

"Where'd you go the first few points?" Marx asked

"Hm. Just took a while."

"Yeah, right." Marx bent and took a drink as Justus moved out of the way. "Who's the girl?"

"That obvious, huh?" Justus asked

"Isn't it always?"

They walked back into the gym and found random balls. At the side goal, they moved around one another and shot.

"She fuck you up?" Marx asked.

"You could say that." Justus bricked and ran after the ball.

"Ball interfering?"

"No." Justus dribbled the ball through his legs. "Hardly ever."

"Really? Usually does. I can't find a girl who doesn't get in my face about it. She tells me to choose. Always. I just laugh. Pisses them off."

"It's just the opposite. I can't get enough of her."

"Damn." Marx held the ball and wiped the bottom of his shoes. "Did you get any more offers?"

"UNC and Kentucky sent me letters. Told me they'd be calling for an answer."

"Get the fuck out." Marx chucked his ball at Justus.

“But I wouldn’t be able to start. Be sitting on the bench. Don’t know if I could handle that.”

“You know coach would die to get you here.”

“Yeah, maybe if you didn’t quit the team. It’d be sweet to play with you, man.”

“Yeah.” Marx nodded as he headed back toward the center of the court. “Let’s go.”

Justus stood beside Marx, glancing around the gym for Dwayne. He stood to the right of him, shaking his head. Had he overheard? The chance to talk about his decision hadn’t come up. No, that was a lie. Justus hadn’t wanted to talk about it. He got the letters and just sat on the front porch staring at them. He knew what they said even before he opened them. But how could he choose? Rani. Dwayne. Florida. How could he let all three go for a game? A game he’d been playing his whole life. A game his parents encouraged to be played by both their children. A game he couldn’t live without. Or could he? What if he couldn’t play ball?

“Let’s go, Justus. Forget her.” Marx chuckled the ball at him.

For a moment, Justus held the ball, staring at the lines and divots he knew by heart. He bent his head and then glanced out, looking for Dwayne. But the blurring of the players began to kick in and the movements were the most important thing. It was like playing with the mute button. Justus let the ball fall out of his hand and dribbled down the court toward the basket. The freedom he’d been looking for that night slid into place and for that moment, all that mattered was the feel of the ball, the communication between him and his teammates, and moving his body around the court. That feeling, of letting it all go, was one of the best things he ever found in ball. That and himself.

The heat clicked on in his parents' kitchen, but Justus still shook with a chill as he chugged a glass of water and grabbed the pitcher out of the refrigerator for a refill.

"When were you gonna tell me you might not be going?" Dwayne sat at the breakfast bar, leaning back in his chair.

"Shit. I didn't know what to tell you. My two dream schools want me and I may not pick either one or, hm, I slept with Rani. Not just fall asleep slept, but sex, intercourse, the real deal."

"Smart ass." Dwayne set the chair back on all four legs and propped his elbows on the counter. "Whattcha gonna do?"

"About which one?" Justus chugged his second glass of water and rinsed it in the sink.

"Take your pick," Dwayne said.

"I dunno. Haven't gotten that far. I thought I'd be so happy. And I'm so fucking confused. Like it's all going too fast and I just want to slow it down. Take it all in moments instead of getting it shoved down my throat. But how?"

"What about Rani?"

Justus screamed and slapped his palm into his forehead. "Why do I love her? Why? She drives me fucking crazy and I can't get her out of my head. Like playing ball, she kept trying to slip in. And, fuck . . . we fucking slept together."

"Yeah. We covered that already."



"Fuck you," Justus said. Dwayne hadn't been surprised, just nodded like he expected it to happen. But Justus hadn't expected it. He was just shooting for a nice kiss. A real kiss. "She left. In the middle of the night. Just said, 'See ya later. I'll call you.' I went after her and it didn't matter. Yeah, bye. Fuck you. God I'm so pissed."

"Probably got scared."

"She's always fucking scared."

"Slow down, man. Chill."

"Why? Why can't I be pissed? I'm not a fucking ballerina. I can't tiptoe around her."

"Justus, man. Stop." Dwayne smacked his hand on the counter. "Stop it, man. She'll call you. She'll explain everything to you when she's ready—"

"So I'm supposed to wait. Fucking sit with my thumb up my ass? Come—"

"Shut up," Dwayne said. "Will you listen? She'll call. She'll stop by--"

"Did she call you?"

"Shut up," Dwayne slapped both hands on the counter this time. "Get off it. You're not the most important thing. Yeah, something big happened last night. Real big. But there's bigger things. Her life. Your life. What're you gonna do about ball? Don't you think you should focus on that for a sec? Just a teeny bit? Damn, man, that's your future. What you've been working for for years. And now you don't know? You aren't sure? BS. You've got to be sure. Cause I'd kill to be hounded—"

"—You are—"

"Not like you, man. Not like you. This is your life man." Dwayne stood up and walked toward the French doors. "It isn't about sex. It isn't about crying cause the girl

won't tell you what's on her mind. A year ago you were whining that all Maria did was yap her head off. Now you've got the opposite and you don't know what to do with yourself."

Dwayne turned to face him. Justus looked down, away from him, almost embarrassed.

"We're only eighteen man. Freaking eighteen. You've got to make a choice, jump in a direction and go for it. Whether or not that direction is toward Rani hasn't mattered. It's like you keep making this so much harder than it is. Man, don't mess this up. Not this."

"But what if it matters now? What if—"

"—It doesn't." Dwayne opened the door, letting in a cool draft of air. "I'm going home. Call me about tonight."

Justus watched Dwayne's back disappear around the house. It couldn't be that easy, could it? Upstairs, Justus turned on the shower and got a towel out of the closet. How could it be that easy? Just choose. It wasn't like he was getting underwear out of his dresser. This was his life. Wait. Dwayne said that. His life. Why couldn't he make a decision about it? What was he afraid of? He kept thinking about Rani, focusing on Rani. Saying she was afraid. That fear held her back. But, damn, he felt freaking hog-tied by it. Even if he made a choice, it wasn't like it was concrete, was it? Couldn't he change his mind? What about Rani? Justus let the water beat his shoulders, his face, his scalp. He held his face in his hands and let the water massage his body, hoping it would massage his mind as well.

## George

He needed to do it. Cleanse himself. The house. Make it a new home. George picked up the phone for the third time. Andrew's number flashed in his mind and he urged his fingers to press the buttons. Thomas' giggle echoed from the living room. It'd been raining all afternoon and Justus had stopped by, was playing with action figures. George dialed the number.

Even though Christmas was three days away, George got Andrew, Mike, and Manny to come over and help. The four of them would be able to lift the heavy stuff. Diatro would help too and Eleanor could keep an eye on Thomas. Rani was out. She needed to finish her portfolio.

"Hey, Justus?" George walked into the living room.

"What's up?" Justus held an action figure in one hand and a truck in the other.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" George pointed toward the hallway.

"Yeah. Sure. Be back in a minute, kiddo."

Justus pushed himself off the floor and followed George into the hallway. George stared up at him, shifted from one foot to the next and then glanced back toward the living room.

"This weekend, um. Well. This weekend I want to clean the house out. The garage. The attic. Or what's left in the attic. And I want to paint the porch and the shutters. And I was—"

"What time do you need me here? I can see if Dwayne could come by too."

"I—uh—yeah. That'd be . . . great. Thanks. We'll probably get started around nine and then work until whenever. As long as the weather is decent."

"No problem." Justus nodded and went back into the living room. "Gotta go, Thomas. It's almost dinner time and if I'm late, my mom will be upset."

"Will you come back soon?"

"I'll be here this weekend. That soon enough?"

"How many days is that?"

"One."

"Yeah. That'll be okay."

"Glad you approve, kiddo. See you." Justus grabbed his backpack from the hallway floor. "See you Saturday, George."

"Yeah, thanks. See you."

George watched him leave. Watched the kid's comfortable stride down the porch and toward his truck. At one time, George must've walked like that. Or maybe he just hoped he had. That confidence. He needed to feel it again. Now. George stared at Thomas. He was picking up his action figures and trucks.

"You hungry?" George asked.

"I wanna wait for Rani." Thomas deposited his toys into a wooden box behind the couch.

"I don't know when she's coming home."

"She's never home." Thomas flung himself on the couch.

“Hey,” George sat next to his son. He took one of the small pillows on the couch and tapped Thomas in the stomach with it.

“Hey.” Thomas slapped at the pillow.

“What’re you gonna do?” George teased.

Thomas picked up another pillow and swatted George in the shoulder. The pillows swung in the air and soon Thomas began to giggle and then laugh. It felt good to be with his son. To make him laugh. To laugh with him.

While Thomas finished cleaning up his toys, George stared out the back door staring at the old, twisted swingset cocked in the backyard. Thomas had stopped drawing Dori and had begun to draw pictures of George. Pictures of the two of them picking oranges, playing at the beach, eating dinner. Rani crept in and out of the pictures, but the color red remained unused.

“Daddy can we get ice cream?”

“Ice cream?” George turned around, still thinking about pulling the swingset out of the ground and taking it to the dump. The sharp twisted metal was dangerous.

“Yeah. I want ice cream. I want to see Justus. Can we see Justus?”

“Which one do you want?” George asked.

Thomas stared at his father and laughed. His front teeth were missing and George stared at the pink of his son’s gums. Thomas’s skin had turned a dark shade of brown ever since they started going to the beach. Before they left, George made sure he lathered Thomas’s skin with sunscreen, but his efforts appeared to be in vain. In the bathtub, Thomas tried to scrub his skin clean. What’re you doing, Tommy? He told George he was trying to

wash his skin clean. George told him about the sun and now Thomas reminded him about the sunscreen, always.

“You’re silly, Daddy.” Thomas ran toward his father. “Let’s get Rani and get ice cream. I want chocolate.”

“For dinner?” George walked with Thomas’s feet on top of his own. George wondered why Justus hadn’t been around for awhile. Rani had been hiding in the studio at school. Her instructor had given her a key, allowing her to get in and out when she wanted. Hours were spent divided between paint and clay, the potter’s wheel and canvases. George brought her lunch a few times, watched her eat, listened as she explained her pieces. But she never mentioned Justus. And George had never asked her about the night she didn’t come home. She apologized to Thomas, took him to the beach the next morning and let him climb onto the surfboard George had bought her. Otherwise, nothing came of it. But maybe George should’ve asked. Maybe.

“Can we go?” Thomas laughed as he swung in front of George.

“You need shoes. So do I.” George wiggled his toes.

Thomas laughed as he ran upstairs. George turned back toward the back door and the swingset leered at him, seemed to twist itself into tighter angles, mocking him. George needed to get rid of it, needed to get rid of the things hiding in the garage. Damn, maybe he just needed to get rid of the house. But he didn’t have that kind of money. But the memories were here. Dori was here. Cut-up, bleeding Dori. Naked in the bathtub. And his son. His beautiful son withdrawn into shock. It took Thomas a week to start speaking again. A week of being held by Rani and George and Eleanor. But it was Justus who got him talking. Justus

who put him in his truck and drove him to his house. Who played basketball with him and then took him to the ice cream shop. Justus who let Thomas get behind the counter and scoop out ice cream. It was then Thomas started talking again. I miss momma. She doesn't love me. She won't come home.

Thomas came into the kitchen with his sandals on and with his father's shoes on his hands. He dropped to his hands and walked toward his father with his butt high in the air. Blinking, George breathed and started to laugh. He grabbed Thomas and swung him into the air. George tickled his son and laughed. They laughed together.

"Let's go get some ice cream," George said.

George lifted the garage door. At 8 o'clock, the temperature was in the forties. He blew into his hands and scanned the contents. His little corner was still set-up. George sat in the wingback and lifted the guitar into his lap. After he strummed a few of the strings and created warped sounds, he leaned his head against the chair and laughed. He was thirty-two years old. Sometimes he felt like an old man. Other times, he felt as if his life hadn't even started.

He had a son. A beautiful son. And Rani—she was like his daughter. More so than Rosaline had ever been. But he was so tired of letting them down, Rani and Thomas. Of promising to be there, of fixing things and then disappearing. What if he couldn't fix it? Thomas already knew too much for a six year old. And Rani. God. He forgot how young she was sometimes. It wasn't just that she'd skipped a grade and would be graduating high school this year. And it wasn't the stuff that went on in the house. Her personality. The way

she would stare, not at a person, but into them. Her eyes absorbed you. George picked at a loose thread on the chair. *Dori. God I miss you.*

“George, you in here?”

Mrs. B stood with her arms full.

“Let me help you.” George grabbed the bags out of her arms.

“I brought some juice and bagels and donuts. Oh, and for later I got some lunch meat and some brownies and cookies.”

“You didn’t—”

“Mr. B’s bringing his ladder over in a little bit so we can get those shutters down. Hope you don’t mind I’m early. Thought I could keep Thomas entertained for a little bit.”

“Thank you.” George paused on the porch steps. He stared down at the small woman who had more spunk than he could ever hope for. “Thank you so much.”

“Oh, Georgey. Anything for one of my boys.” She patted his arm and gave him a large smile. “Thomas?” Mrs. B walked into the house, as if she belonged there.

George shook his head and followed her inside.

Justus and Dwayne tugged on one side and George and Manny tugged on the other. The swingset wouldn’t budge. Instead of lifting the poles out of the ground, they had only succeeded in bending them so now the swings touched the ground in a miniature version.

“The things rotted into the ground,” Manny laughed as they struggled one more time.

George’s hands slid across the rusted metal. He grunted as he tried to pull at the poles lodged into the ground.



"Woah, hey. It moved over here," Dwayne shouted.

"Keep going," George said.

The four tugged at once and the swingset gave on one side and then the other. In an awkward shuffle, they carried the swingset around the house toward Mike's truck. They continued to bend the poles, making the swingset as small as possible. After they lifted it into the truck, they stood around laughing.

"Holy shit," George whistled. "If I didn't hate that thing so much, it would've stayed." He stared down at his hands. Callused, dry, a few blisters and now a reddish hue of rust. But no impulse to wash them, to search the cupboards for lotion. Instead, George picked at a blister and laughed. "I'm thirsty."

The day had warmed up into the seventies. A dumpster in front of the house contained half the garage. Boxes, moth eaten rugs and clothes. Broken tables. The rest of the furniture sat littered across the yard. Mrs. B had taken the antiques a few weeks before. George had gotten a check for almost \$5000. With that, he bought the paint and paid a huge sum to his father. And with the rest, he put it in a bank account for Rani. He knew she'd get into school. It was just a matter of her opening the letters.

"Come get some tea," Mrs. B held up two jugs on the porch. "Sweet and unsweet."

George sat on the steps and took a large gulp of sweet tea. Thomas crawled onto his lap and swung his legs. The boy was covered in paint.

"I'm helping the church ladies," Thomas said.

"Yeah?" George tickled Thomas' side. "Looks like they're painting you instead of the shutters."

"Don't be silly," Thomas patted his father's jeans.

George wanted to hug Thomas, hard. To feel the child's warmth, his heartbeat, his unmeasurable amount of love. How could the boy love so much after being hurt so much? George stared at the group of people around him. Friends. He had a lot of friends. Dori slipped in and out of his mind. Not the Dori he knew now, but the old Dori. The one with the long hair and the flowing skirts. The one who surprised him with carrot cake and peanut butter bars. The one who rubbed his neck in just the right spots to ease his headaches. The one who smiled at him as she slid the ring down his finger. The ring that now sat in a box in his dresser. George sighed and squeezed Thomas.

"Let's get a picture," Mrs. B hollered. "A celebration."

She ushered them all onto the porch steps, her arms swinging like a conductor's. George saw Rani pull in front of the house. She sat in the pickup for a minute before getting out.

"Come get in the picture, Rain," Dwayne hollered at her.

To George's relief, she dropped her art supplies beside the pickup and came toward them with a smile on her face.

"Wow," she said. "It looks great. Hope I can still help."

She sat on the porch between Dwayne and Justus. George glanced over at them. Justus smiled at her and touched her shoulder. When he asked Justus to help, George knew Rani wouldn't be home. But now that she was, he hoped she wouldn't be mad at him for asking. Things seemed awkward, but not miserable.

Thomas squirmed from George's lap and sat on Rani's. He patted her face, getting paint on her cheeks.

"Nice touch, Thomas," Dwayne laughed. "Now she's got navy paint mixed with yellow and red."

"Yellow and red?" Rani asked.

"Painting that sunset, huh?" Dwayne teased.

George nodded his head and stared toward Mrs. B. Doing that story on the ice cream shop had to have been one of the best moments. That's where Rani and Justus met. Where Rani found her sanity over the years. Thank God for that. Everyone on the porch crowded together and smiled as Mrs. B took several shots with her husband's camara.

"You in bed?" George asked.

"Yup," Thomas said.

George came into the bedroom and grabbed the book off the dresser. They were reading *Soup*. Thomas liked how George changed his voice for the different characters. Because they were boys and George could do it better than Rani. That's what Thomas said anyway.

"Scootch," George nudged Thomas.

On the bed, George opened the book and searched for their spot. Just as he was about to start, Rani tapped on the doorframe.

"Can I listen too?" she asked.

"Come," Thomas held out his arm to her and then patted on the bed.

George nodded. "There's plenty of room."

"Cool." Rani grinned and climbed onto the other side of Thomas.

George didn't want to make a big deal out of the moment, but he felt as if his heart would beat itself out of his chest. A family. However much altered and scarred, a family. He pressed the book open with the palm of his hand and started to read. Not much later, Thomas' soft breathing, heavy, filled the room.

"He asleep?" George asked.

"Yeah. I think he was a little excited today."

"Thanks for helping out when you got home."

"No—hey. Sorry I couldn't help more. But my portfolio's almost done."

"Thomas misses you."

"I know," Rani patted Thomas' belly. "I miss him."

A pause. A large pause filled the bedroom. George stared at the train border traveling around the top of the room. He remembered how he and Dori laughed as they tried to put it up. The glue kept sticking to their fingers and they couldn't get the border straight. They made love on the floor, laughing and holding each other. Those moments were what George needed to hold on to.

"I'm afraid. To go to school," Rani said.

"What? Hey—you'll be fine."

"I . . . Thomas. What if he doesn't remember. What if—"

“Hey. He talks about you all the time, Rani. He loves you. Really. The kid will always need you. Just because he has me doesn’t mean anything. You’ve been there for him the past few months—when I—when all I thought about was myself. He won’t forget.”

Rani nodded, chewed on her bottom lip. George studied her face, searched for Dori. Only in hints could he see his wife in Rani. He looked away and thought about Rani’s father. About how his presence always lingered in his daughter’s face. George shook his head and stared at Thomas and Rani. She had put her head on Thomas’ belly.

“I love listening to him breath,” she said. “Maybe I’m afraid to leave cause he makes me feel better.”

“He’ll be here.” George glanced around the room. “We’ll always be here.”

“Yeah?” Rani pushed up onto her elbows.

“Thanks, George.”

“For?”

“Thanks for coming back. For . . . for being like a dad.”

“You sure you don’t mind?”

He made her blush. That was so like Dori. George smiled and stared down at the book.

“I remember how you used to make us peanut butter and banana sandwiches. And you always snuck honey onto mine. And you’d write notes on my napkins. I remember stuff like that George. Things you used to do for me. Yeah, the bad stuff’s there. But it isn’t the only stuff. You know?”

“Yeah,” George swallowed the lump in his throat. “We did have a lot of good times, huh?”

“Yeah,” Rani nodded as she picked up one of Thomas’ stuffed animals and played with its arms.

“I’ll miss you. When you go to school,” he said.

Rani glanced up at him. He wondered, really, what she saw. A father? A man who slept with her sister? Someone who worshipped her mother? What did she see? They only talked in breaths to one another. Once he and Rosaline began to mess things up, Rani pulled away. Stopped talking. But her eyes spoke volumes. The problem was that George couldn’t get the message. Was it hate? Sadness? Confusion? All three. George shook his head and then stared back at Rani.

“You’re the closest thing I’ve had to a father,” she said. “And it may not have always seemed like it . . . but—thanks.” Rani pushed herself up and scooted off the bed. “Really. Thanks, George.” She went to leave, but hesitated. “Will you go running with me sometime? I’ll take it easy on you.”

“Really?” George felt nervous for a moment. It’d been years since he’d gone running with her. Don’t ruin the moment, he thought. “Yeah, sure. Whenever.”

“G’night.” Rani left the bedroom.

He continued to sit on the bed long after she had left. Thomas had rolled over and curled his back against George’s leg. The back of his pajama top had rolled up, revealing the small of his back. The elastic band of his underwear stuck up out of his pajama bottoms and George smiled. His son. His. He pulled Thomas’ shirt down and tugged the covers up. As

he sat on his son's bed, George felt his mind drifting. Not in pandamonium like it had been going, but like he was on clouds, on a float in the ocean out past the waves. Just easing his way through the past. Through the future. He never even felt himself fall asleep.

## Rani

The cool breeze tickled Rani's nose in the evening light. She thought about going upstairs to get a sweatshirt but instead she pulled her neck down and wrapped her arms tighter around her legs. She read the letter today. A full scholarship to study painting and ceramics and if she wanted to run for them that was an option as well. They wanted her to fly up for a visit to New York. The envelope sat unopened on the kitchen table for two days until George shoved it into her hands and told her to open it or he'd throw it away. Even then, she still hesitated. Sure, she worked hours on her portfolios just to get them perfect. Then, even more hours were spent with Diatro. He made sure every comma was in its proper place on her sample essay. Never before had she agonized over an essay. *What does art mean to me? Why is college important? What will I do with a college education?* It hadn't been enough that the schools all had different essay topics. The portfolio requirements all differed in slight ways too. A lot of work went into getting these letters, and instead of ripping them open, Rani stared at them, either hoping she could make them disappear or somehow see through the folds of paper and read the writing. This letter could be her invitation out of here. And now that it was a guaranteed exit, she hesitated. Did she really want to leave? *Yes, God yes.* But why didn't it feel that way?

Thomas and George had left for the park a few hours earlier after they'd decorated the Christmas tree George's father brought over. They'd come back soon and she'd need to give Thomas a bath. Rani sat on the porch and rocked, staring at the cars passing the house, the neighbors walking their dogs, husbands returning home from a full day of work. College. New York. Vermont. DC. Mountains and snow and huge trees or a big city with museums



and history. No Spanish moss, no palm trees, no sand, no ocean. No Thomas. *No—don't think it, don't think it—no Justus.*

She hadn't really talked to him since she went to his house that night. Since—she still didn't know why she did it. Why she needed him to hold her, to feel him. Too easy to say she needed him because of her mother. Something else, something else. Had to be. But the way he looked at her and made her feel. Was it love? All of the love in her life seemed too fucked up—how could she get a definition of the feeling if she only received love in unusual ways? Thomas. That was love.

The urge to see Justus, to talk to him, became a necessity. Rani ran into the house for a sweatshirt and her keys. The sweatshirt she grabbed had been an old one of Justus'. Faded black with a hood. Rani pulled this over her head as she got into the pickup. A cold spell had hit the area and she could feel the cool vinyl through her jeans. She didn't know if the heat worked in the truck, but she'd soon find out. As she waited for the truck to warm-up, Rani kept thinking about the cathedral in St. Augustine. About the statue hidden in the courtyard in its own alcove with the curved marble benches. And the tall twisted trees with stringy bark and small leaves. She wanted to take him there. To show him her thinking spot.

Rani pulled into his driveway and ran around the house. The basketball court stood empty so Rani knocked on the French door. Bekki slid the door open and gave her a smile. The awkwardness leered for a moment before they rushed through greetings and explanations for not seeing one another. Justus was at the park playing ball. For a moment, Rani felt the hesitation, but she pushed it away. Fuck it. Go get him. At the park, Rani swung the truck around the parking lot and angled her headlights onto the court. She didn't know any of the

guys he was playing ball with. Justus went up for a shot and missed. She watched him shake his head as he made his way back down the court. His face looked tired. Why hadn't she called him? Go get him. Go.

Rani moved toward the edge of the court and waited for a pause in play. While Justus drank from his water bottle, Rani walked closer.

"Justus?" She watched his face, the shock, the embarrassment for showing the shock. "You got a minute?"

"Um—" He glanced around the court. "Yeah. Hey Jay, take my spot."

"Thanks," Rani said. Inside, she felt like her stomach was shredding itself and swirling around like death colored confetti.

"I got a drive with Sam," Justus said. "That all right?"

"Yeah. Definitely. Get in." Rani pointed at the pickup.

Inside, Justus pulled on a sweatshirt and took another swig from his bottle. "Playing like shit anyway. What's going on?" He fastened his seatbelt and moved into the corner of the truck.

"Needed to see you."

"Oh?"

"Wanted—look—I'm sorry."

"Yeah? Me too," he said.

Rani could feel the hesitation, the sarcasm, in his voice. Had she twisted their relationship out of existence. It had to go deeper than that. It had to mean more than that. How could she make him understand? How could she make herself understand?

"I got the scholarship in New York," she mumbled.

"What? Yeah? Cool. That's great, Rain. Really great."

Is he being sincere, she thought. Yes. Why are you analyzing him? Because you fucked him over. Stop it. Stop it. Start talking. Stop holding it all in and letting the thoughts flip around inside of you. Isn't doing you any good. Talk. Where to begin? The fight with Rosaline? Dori? George? Or start with Justus first. About how she watched him all day, the way he crinkled his nose when he laughed, the way he lifted Thomas over his head, or the way he treated Mrs. B with respect. Rani cracked her neck and sighed. He needs to hear about me, about my thoughts.

"When, um—" Breathe, she thought. "—back when I got pretty messed up. Rosaline." Rani gripped the steering wheel, her hands sweating. "I—she and George had been having sex."

"Rani—"

"I need to say this. Is it okay?"

Justus nodded. He went to put his hand on her shoulder, but he stopped and let it drop on the seat. Rani picked up his hand and placed it on her shoulder. Felt the heaviness, the warmth.

"I—I guess you could say I exposed them. I just couldn't handle it anymore. And Rosaline. She felt betrayed I guess. Went ballistic. And when I came home that afternoon, when we all went to the beach, she let me have it. I never saw it coming." Rani saw the blood, heard the punches and fists, saw the solidity of the refrigerator door coming at her face. Push past it, girl. Come on. "I woke up with Thomas next to me. And Mr. Diatro wasn't

home so he got George. Things seemed to be getting better, but my mom kept getting worse. And. She tried killing herself.” Rani turned on her signal and merged into the right lane. She took a deep breath and rested her cheek against Justus’ hand for a moment. “Diatro told George he needed to commit her or he’d call the state and Thomas—”

“Rain . . . stop whenever you need to,” Justus said.

She smiled at him. For days, she’d seen George playing with Thomas, giving him a bath with huge bubbles. Carrying him piggyback to bed. Reading a story to him. Asking her about art. Making sure she ate lunch and dinner if not breakfast too. Who was this guy? An absence. A friend. A father. Too many things. And nothing at all. Was that the fear? That if she got too close to George she’d realize he didn’t really have anything to give her? She wasn’t his. Who did she belong to? Herself. Was it that simple? How alone that felt.

She took a breath and stared at Justus in the darkness of the truck. His sweat and heat filtered in the cab and Rani took a deep breath. He always understood. It was George she had to thank for meeting Justus. Five years ago, George had been sent to cover the grand opening of an ice cream shop in town. Rani tagged along with him because Rosaline had been acting scary and she didn’t want to be home alone. So, she followed him into the shop and her eyes swarmed around the place. Bright colors. Unmatched tables and chairs painted different colors and designs. Photographs of mountains and waterfalls on the walls. And Native Americans. And animals. Once she looked closer, she noticed the words. Printed words covered at least half the walls and the tabletops. Faded words mixed in with the occasional bold print. Political statements. Statistics about the environment. Rani found out

later that Bekki, Justus' mother, had decorated the place even though she'd never call herself an artist.

That day, while Rani was taking in the surroundings and the rainsoaked people who kept filing in and George talking to various customers, Rani noticed the slight echoing noise of something tapping. The echo wasn't loud enough to be heard if you weren't paying attention, if you didn't try to find some type of silence in the crowded shop. But Rani heard it and the source puzzled her. She walked toward the restrooms and the echoing got louder. There was a back door and Rani pushed this open without even looking back to see what George was doing. Out in the rain, a guy dribbled a basketball around his body, between his legs, and back around. It took some time before he noticed her watching him. And then he just introduced himself. Stuck his hand out and smiled. Rani'd never met any kid who did that. While it took her off guard, she smiled back and shook his hand. He gave her hand a firm shake, not one of those soft one's older people and boys gave to girls. Shock set in when she found out he was in her grade. He was big even then. More than that, though, he reached out to her.

Days would be spent with Justus roaming through the woods in her neighborhood before they ripped them down. Going to the beach and learning how to bodysurf and then even attempting to use a surfboard. Using his parents' kayaks. Eating gallons of ice cream. They were friends. Always had been friends. Rani never questioned this. Justus made her laugh. Gave her a place away from her house, a place that comforted her and made her feel like she didn't always have to be afraid. As they got older, she would tease him about his girlfriends, question him about basketball, find out more about his parents and his brother.

Things with Justus weren't ever questioned. But now. In the past few months. How did it get so fucked up? Because they tried to push past friendship? Or was it because she stopped talking, stopped sharing parts of herself with him? She needed to talk to him and find out. Rani glanced at Justus again. His head rested against the seat, but his eyes stared at her.

He asked, "What're you thinking?"

"Hm. That's my question," she laughed. Rearranged her hands on the worn steering wheel. "About when I first met you."

"Yeah," Justus laughed. "Who knew, huh? Long time ago." He looked away from her and stared out the window.

"I love you," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Hey, don't sound so shocked. You know I love you."

"Yeah, I do," he said.

"I hope you'll always be my friend, Justus. Always."

"As long as you let me, Rain. It's—"

"I know I haven't been making it easy. I'm distracted and now. I feel like we're sort of hanging in new territory—"

"That's just it, though. Why does it have to change anything? Damn, you're my best friend. And no one understands that but you. Not even Dwayne gets it really. How we haven't hooked up earlier. But—I . . . Rani, I don't need you to be more than my friend, but I do need you. Does that make sense?"

She nodded, felt a mix of emotions stumble into her belly. Nervous yet totally comfortable in one breath.

“How come you sound like you aren’t sure about that school?” he asked.

“You’re one to talk. Mister I can’t make a commitment yet.”

“Hey, we’re talking about you right now. Not me. And maybe I’ve made a decision.”

“Really? Tell me.”

“Nice try. We’re talking about you here. So, uh, why aren’t you sure about this school?”

Rani hesitated, thought for a moment, and then spoke. “My art’s become this outlet and I’m afraid that when I don’t need the outlet that my attraction is gonna stop, that it won’t feel the same. Give me the same satisfaction.”

“Really?” Justus touched the side of her face and then dropped his hand to the seat again. “You’ll always be into art. It’s a part of you like ball is a part of me. I mean it,” he said.

His words gave her warmth. Made her want to tell him everything. Made her want to crawl into his lap and feel him next to her. Instead, she regripped the steering wheel and stared at the road ahead. There were no streetlights on A1A and where there were no houses, the road loomed in darkness and the beach to the right of them crashed in a seeming nonexistence.

“I don’t know why I stopped talking to you,” she said.

Silence slid into the cab of the truck. She’d been doing well. But that other stuff had been easy. Somewhat. He already knew most of it. None of it came as a surprise. But this

stuff. Telling him how she felt in regard to him. This stuff was more personal. Was stuff she'd kept tucked inside of herself until the social worker made her see the therapist.

"I love you," she said. "I really do, Justus—"

"—I know—"

"—but it's like I want to keep a part of myself safe. Because if I gave you everything . . . you're leaving for ball and now I've got this art scholarship. And—I'm tired of hurting. I just—when we were friends, it was so easy. But when we moved past that, I got afraid I'd lose you. Got afraid things would be different cause now you'd know even more about what was going on in my house. With my mom and Rosaline. And—"

"I love you," he said.

"Sometimes that isn't enough, though. Right?" She shook her head. The answer already gleamed in obviousness.

"We'll always be friends," he said. "Always."

Ala passed through the heart of St. Augustine. Rani pulled onto a side street and searched for a parking spot. The cathedral stood close to the college. She remembered that much. Sometimes she'd get a ride with George and Dori and then would go wander through the graveyards and then come to the cathedral. The building stood tall above the palm trees and surrounding houses. Arched windows, turrets, and massive wooden doors. Discovering the courtyard had been an accident. But Rani liked the idea of finding a quiet spot while being surrounded by houses and cars and tourists. Sometimes the courtyard got crowded. At night, aside from the wandering homeless person, it remained empty.

"Ready?" she asked.



Justus grabbed a pair of basketball warm-ups from his bag and pulled these on as Rani fidgeted on the sidewalk. She pulled the strings on the hood of her sweatshirt, creating a cocoon around her head. A deep breath made her realize confederate jasmine grew nearby. She scanned the yards for the small white flowers but couldn't find any amidst the white Christmas lights.

"Around that tree." Justus pointed toward a tall tree which stood next to the porch of a house.

Rani smiled. Felt that thrill of comfort give a little tap in her stomach, a reassuring kick. She grabbed his hand, felt the dry calluses on his palms and fingers. Basketball and lifting weights. The roughness of his hands comforted her, as if it gave him traction, kept him in place. He slowed his pace and almost strolled next to her, swinging their hands between them.

"Where we going?" he asked.

"Wondering when you were gonna ask me."

"Didn't want you to stop. Got kind of excited."

She swatted at him. In the past, she never took initiative. Instead, she let him do the leading, always asking him questions along the way. But tonight, she needed to. Feeling the pressing urge. "I wanted to take you to my special place."

Justus squeezed her hand and bumped into her. This moment, this small expanse of time felt as if it was expanding, growing and trying to fill the emptiness from the previous week, from the previous months. Why'd she stop talking to him? He always understood. Why'd she doubt him now?

Near the cathedral, Rani pulled on Justus' hand and guided him around a low wall made of coquina. Justus ducked under an archway and then they were in the courtyard. The smell of confederate jasmine was strong and sweet. Rani wanted to suck on it like she sometimes did with the nectar of honeysuckle. But the jasmine was too small, too delicate. Small shrubs and plants lined the cobblestone pathway. In the moonlight, they could make out different flowers, odd shaped bushes, and hidden benches. They turned around the side of the cathedral, and Rani felt a thump in her stomach. She wanted to bite her nails, rip at the skin next to them with her teeth. Instead, she kept one hand in Justus' and the other stuffed into the pocket of her jeans.

"Here," Rani breathed.

In an alcove, Rani pulled Justus onto a bench. In front of them stood a tall statue of a woman made from white stone. Her expression was neither happiness or sorrow, but more of a pensiveness. Robes gathered around her, creating the illusion that her body didn't begin or end. Small carved birds perched at her feet and one sat on her hand. A delicate hand, but not frail. It was the facial expression which made her seem strong, stoic, wonderful.

"If she could talk you'd know all my secrets," Rani said.

"I like her," Justus said.

"I thought you might."

Rani leaned into him, felt his warmth through their sweatshirts. The evening kept getting cooler. They really needed jackets. Hot cocoa sounded good about now. George said something about decorating the tree with popcorn tonight. Presents still needed to be bought and wrapped. Christmas was only two days away. But she needed to be here.

Needed Justus to be with her. The bench was cold, making it seem as if she was sitting naked on the marble.

Tell him. Go on, she tried to urge herself. "I'm sorry I stopped talking to you. I can't take it back, really. But I didn't—I didn't do it to hurt you. I just—it's just—your life is so different than mine. When we were friends . . . it was different then. And now that we're more than friends . . . it's just—"

"Hey, Rain," Justus said. "You'll always be my best friend." He turned and looked at her, took both of her hands into his own. "Look at me. Come on, look at me."

She could see him, his eyes, the long lashes, the angle of his jaw, the small cut he must've gotten from shaving that morning. All these things were visible to her under the moonlight. For a moment, she glanced at the sky. She could see the moon peering from behind the branches of a tree, but the stars stood visible across the blackness of the sky. The courtyard lacked any artificial light, creating an amazing place to study the stars. Rani searched for Orion, but the opening between the cathedral and the trees was too small. She took a breath and looked back at Justus.

He continued, "We'll always be best friends. Always. Do you get that?"

"Yeah—"

"I don't think you do. You're my best friend and I'm not going to go back on that or change my mind or whatever. No matter what happens. College or our more than friends relationship or your family. None of that is gonna change how I feel about you." He paused, gripped her hands inside both of his. Rani wanted to hold him, to kiss him, to save this moment so she could look back on it whenever she needed a pause, a time to stop her

whirling world and realize she wasn't alone. Justus squeezed her hands again and then continued.

"I love you. Always. You're my best friend, Rain. You know all about school and about my parents and ball, God you know everything about ball. And you used to be that way with me and I miss that. I'd rather have that than have you the way you've been acting. Granted, the other night was—it was beautiful. You're beautiful. But it hurt, Rain. You just walked away. And—"

"I'm sorry—"

"Don't walk away from our friendship. That's what I care about most. I can live without ever making love to you or touching you in that way. But I can't lose our friendship. Even if you're in Vermont or New York and I'm in Kentucky or North Carolina. Wherever we are. Always remember me. Don't forget that, Rain. Please."

She felt the tears and for the first time, she didn't want to stop them. They didn't burn like she thought but instead felt warm against her face. The vision of Justus blurred as her eyes filled. Emotions swirled inside of her. She wanted to cry, to laugh, to kiss him, to run to college, to paint, to tickle Thomas, to see her mother. But she sat on a bench behind a cathedral with her best friend. With someone who knew everything. And still, he sat with her. He held her, pulled her closer as she cried harder. Rani fell into him, gripped his sweatshirt, pushed her face into his chest, felt him breathing, felt his solidity.

"I love you," he said. "No matter what. Unconditionally. Always."

## PART FOUR

Rani

I've been away for over a year, but sometimes, most times, it feels like I haven't left. In the middle of the night, I wake up with my shirt twisted and sweat-soaked and my chest heaves in wild arcs. I sit up and gulp for air, for a breath, reminding myself, breathe, just breathe. The moonlight shines into my dorm room and I study the objects surrounding me. There's no physical memory of Florida except for two things.

People always ask me how I broke my nose. That lie has become easy. I fell off a jungle gym when I was a kid. I've learned to finesse the story, learned how to make my heart stop skipping to a wild dance beat, learned how to stop feeling the ridge in my nose. Except for when I'm alone. When I'm stuck in the middle of a piece, when I can't sleep at night, when I think of Thomas. Of Rosaline.

A few months after I left, George called. The police had phoned him. Discovered Rosaline's body in a hotel room. She'd overdosed. I wanted to feel sad. But if relief and emptiness can ever be combined into one emotion, that's what happened. She would never come back. I would never see her again. Feel the warm thickness of her body sleeping next to me, remember the way she would play games with me and Thomas. Games to forget what was really happening. But it was during that phone call that I realized Roz wasn't crazy. It was the drugs. Whatever she could get her hands on is what George said. How did I not notice? Maybe guilt mixed in with relief and emptiness.

When people ask about Roz, I want to lie. To tell them she's living out west and working for some computer business or that she's in Europe, traveling and working. But

most times, I change the subject, shrug my shoulders and tell them I'm not sure, that we don't talk. When people don't get concrete answers, they like to push. They'll do anything to try and get an answer out of you. Especially if they know someone who tried and couldn't. Because then there's gossip and bragging rights. College kids are strange.

They ask about my mother too. I tell them I don't know her, that I was raised by my father. Sometimes, I feel like it isn't a lie. George hurt me in ways I'll never be able to forget. But distance has let me see that George hurt himself too. He has enough guilt and demons loaded on his shoulders—he doesn't need anything else weighing on him. Not only that, but holding a grudge is exhausting. It isn't that I've forgotten. Instead, I remember the good times. I think of the care packages he and Thomas send me filled with art supplies and Thomas' drawings and Mrs. B's cookies.

The second physical memory I have of Florida is the portrait I painted of my family. It's all of us standing together, not looking happy, but making it work. Staying together as a family. Together just as things started to fall apart. I put neutral stares on everyone's face. Except for George. Because he's looking down at Thomas with a huge smile. That's how the real photo was and I couldn't change that. Plus, I imagine that's how George still looks at Thomas. The portrait makes me feel content.

I do have the picture Mrs. B, the church lady, took of the group of us before I left. Me and Thomas and George and Justus and Dwayne and Diatro and Eleanor. Sitting on the front porch just after we painted the house. We're covered in white and blue splotches of paint, especially me and Thomas. If photos smelled, one would notice the scent of paint, sweat, and brownies and cookies thanks to Mrs. B's handiwork. The photo makes me hurt,

though. Makes me want to pack up everything and drive as quickly as possible. But I won't do that. I can't. So the picture remains stuffed in the bottom of my dresser drawer here in my dorm room. If I need to remember, I can pull it out. Most times, though, I can rely on my own memory and not that of a photo.

Why does that picture hurt? Because things fall apart, but sometimes, when they're put back together, they end up better than before. My family is one of those sometimes. It used to be that I vowed to leave without going back. Anything had to be better than my life there. But when I left the situation, I realized our minds can make things worse. We can stop seeing reality and instead start living through our memories. The later can be devastating when others around you are working to create new things, new ideas of love and family. George worked and I started to learn how to accept, how to love back.

Tonight in my dorm room, I change into a dry shirt and I lean my head against the cool window pane. For a moment, I think about calling Dwayne. I really want to talk to Justus but it's too late. They run him ragged with practice. We're only six hours apart. I see him every chance I get. Justus is my anchor, my consistency, my love. I think about calling him again. He'll yell at me when I tell him I didn't. Instead of calling either one, I open the window and the curtains blow in as a gust of cold winter air swirls around my legs. I smile at myself and think, breathe.